

Researching the Archaeological Past Through Imagined

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Routledge Studies in Archaeology

RESEARCHING THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL PAST THROUGH IMAGINED NARRATIVES

A NECESSARY FICTION

Edited by
Daniël van Helden and Robert Witcher



“For both readers and writers of archaeological fiction, this volume discusses in depth the relationship between archaeological scientific writing and narratives based on archaeological discoveries. Between the opening chapter laying out the pitfalls, as well as the value of historical fiction, and the concluding summary, essays by authors of archaeological tales provide first-hand perspectives. I recommend this book to both producers and consumers of archaeological fiction.”

*Sarah Milledge Nelson, Distinguished University Professor, University
of Denver*

Researching the Archaeological Past through Imagined Narratives

Archaeological interpretation is an imaginative act. Stratigraphy and artefacts do not tell us what the past was like; that is the task of the archaeologist. The diverse group of contributors to this volume address the relationship between archaeology and imagination through the medium of historical fiction and fictive techniques, both as consumers and as producers. The fictionalisation of archaeological research is often used to disseminate the results of scholarly or commercial archaeology projects for wider public outreach. Here, instead, the authors focus on the question of what benefits fiction and fictive techniques, as inspiration and method, can bring to the practice of archaeological research.

The contributors, a mix of archaeologists, novelists and other artists, present a variety of theoretical arguments and examples to advance the case for the value of a reflexive engagement between archaeology and fiction. Themes include the similarities and differences in the motives and methods of archaeologists and novelists, translation, empathy, and the need to humanise the past and diversify archaeological narratives. The authors discuss the epistemological and ethical issues surrounding the influence of fiction on researchers and the incorporation of fictive techniques in their work. Sometimes dismissed as distracting just-so stories, or even as dangerously relativistic narratives, the use of fictive techniques has a long history in archaeological research, and examples from the scholarly literature on many varied periods and regions are considered.

The volume sets out to bring together examples of these disparate applications and to focus attention on the need for explicit recognition of the problems and possibilities of such approaches, and on the value of further research about them.

Daniël van Helden is a doctoral student at the University of Leicester, UK. His research focuses on the theory, method and nature

of archaeological thinking, specifically the concept of identity, as well as the potential of Fuzzy Set Theory and ontological database approaches for archaeology.

Robert Witcher is Associate Professor of Archaeology at Durham University, UK, and the editor of the world archaeology journal *Antiquity*. His research interests include landscape archaeology with a particular focus on the pre-Roman and Roman periods in Italy and the Mediterranean, where he has explored aspects of ancient settlement, agriculture and demography.

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A Necessary Fiction

Edited by

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To our children

Let us never stop telling stories

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Margaret Elphinstone has authored a series of historical novels including *Islanders*, *The Sea Road*, *Voyageurs* and *Light*. Her latest, *The Gathering Night*, is set in Mesolithic Scotland. She has also published poetry, short stories and literary criticism. She now mainly writes essays. She has worked as a volunteer on archaeological excavations in Scotland, including Papa Stour, Shetland and Mine Howe, Orkney. She is Emerita Professor in the Department of English Studies, University of Strathclyde. She lives in Galloway.

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Donald Henson is an archaeologist who began his career as a lithics specialist before moving into archaeological education and public engagement with heritage. Don worked for Wakefield Museums, Galleries and Castles before moving to the Council for British Archaeology, and is now at the University of York, UK. His most recent research has examined the communication of the British Mesolithic to public audiences across traditional publishing, the Internet and digital media, museums and in schools. As part of this work, he has created a set of downloadable school resources for the Mesolithic site of Star Carr.

Fiona Hobden is Senior Lecturer in Greek Culture at the University of Liverpool, UK. Her teaching and research cover topics in ancient Greek society, culture, politics and thought, as well as the reception of classical antiquity. She has a particular interest in how television programmes represent the ancient world, especially documentaries, and together with Amanda Wrigley she has co-edited *Ancient Greece on British television* (Edinburgh, 2018).

Erin Kavanagh is a poet, artist and archaeologist at Sheffield Hallam University, UK. Her research concentrates on the space between disciplines, where perceptions are transformed. This encompasses geomythology, Sci-Art, interfaith, theory and site-specific performance, with a particular emphasis on the relationship between fact and fiction. Through these themes, the machinations of science communication and outreach are explored, along with engaging process as method. Her commercial and academic work is grounded in submerged landscapes through applied onto-epistemology and geoscience. This has led into the exploration of the role of memory in narratives of environmental change along with the use of deep mapping as proof-of-concept ethnographic

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Giulia Osti obtained her Master's degree in Archaeology from the University of Ferrara, Italy, in 2014 with a dissertation on archaeobotany. In the same year, she began her involvement in the excavation at the Terramara of Pilastrì, where she is responsible for communications and informatics. As a professional graphic designer, she has collaborated in recent years with several cultural associations in Italy including *Archeostorie* and Culture Keys. Alongside her interest in community archaeology, she is also developing research in the field of plant biology.

Mark Patton worked as a professional archaeologist for 18 years, focusing primarily on the Neolithic of the Channel Islands and north-western France. During this time, he published a series of academic monographs and articles based on excavation and fieldwork, as well as works of archaeological synthesis. Subsequently moving through a variety of careers, including politics and academic leadership, he has finally settled on novel writing. He has published three novels to date: *Undreamed Shores*, *An Accidental King* and *Omphalos*.

Joanna Paul is Senior Lecturer in Classical Studies at the Open University, UK. Her research interests lie in the field of Classical Reception Studies and particularly in the ways in which the ancient world has been reinterpreted and reimagined in contemporary popular culture. She has published widely on cinematic receptions of antiquity, exploring films as diverse as *Alexander* and *Fellini-Satyricon*, including a monograph, *Film and the classical epic tradition* (Oxford University Press, 2013). She also works on contemporary receptions of Pompeii, and is the co-convenor of the Classical Reception Studies Network (www.classicalreception.org).

Adrian Praetzelis has a PhD in Anthropology (University of California, Berkeley) and is Professor Emeritus at Sonoma State University. But he learned his trade on the now-defunct British archaeology circuit, slowly advancing from itinerant digger to site supervisor. Among other things, Adrian has taught archaeology and historic preservation to university students, Native American tribes and government agencies. He is the author/illustrator of three books on archaeological method and theory, including *Archaeological theory in a nutshell* (Routledge, 2015), as well as

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Victoria Thompson is an archaeologist and historical novelist. She holds a doctorate from the University of York, UK, and has published academic works on Anglo-Saxon and Viking Age Britain. Under the names V.M. Whitworth and Victoria Whitworth, she has published historical novels, *The Bone Thief*, *The Traitors' Pit* and *The Daughter of the Wolf*, set in the same period which she researches, and a work of memoir entitled *Swimming with Seals*. She is currently working on a new novel entitled *Other Gods*.

Daniël van Helden is a doctoral student at the University of Leicester, UK. His research focuses on the theory, method and nature of archaeological thinking. His thesis examines the limits of the archaeological applicability of the concept of identity, as

well as the potential of Fuzzy Set Theory and ontological database approaches for archaeology. The combination of the latter two approaches offers the potential for a closer correspondence between the language with which archaeologists describe their theories and that used to describe and analyse data.

Caroline Wickham-Jones is an archaeologist who lives and works in the archipelago of Orkney. She is associated as Honorary Fellow with the University of Aberdeen and the Institute for Northern Studies, University of the Highlands and Islands, UK. Her research focuses on the development of the landscape and the prehistoric settlement of Scotland. In addition to numerous academic texts, she has published several popular books and focuses on the communication of archaeology to a wider audience through lectures, radio, television and a blog. She is keen to help others make use of archaeological research and has worked with several authors to facilitate the writing of their novels.

Robert Witcher is Associate Professor of Archaeology at Durham University, UK. His research focuses on landscape archaeology with a particular concentration on the pre-Roman and Roman periods in Italy and the Mediterranean, where he has explored aspects of ancient settlement, agriculture and demography. He has published articles on the use of phenomenology and globalisation theory to interpret the Roman past and its legacy in the contemporary world, including the use of fictive vignettes and imagined journeys. He is the editor of the world archaeology journal *Antiquity*.

Preface

The origin of this volume can be traced back to the Theoretical Roman Archaeology Conference (TRAC) held in 2014 at the University of Reading, UK. In conversation, we discovered a shared fascination with the TV series *Spartacus* (see Hobden, this volume) and, in particular, our disturbed sleep patterns after watching each blood-soaked episode. Why, we wondered, did we keep tuning in for the next instalment? What made this improbable reimagining of Roman Italy so compelling? Certainly not the *mise en scène* or the music. Yet as an evocation of the complex social world of the Roman republic—the competitive jockeying for status, the diversity of identities, the cheapness of life—*Spartacus* is remarkably successful. We decided to organise a conference session to explore some of the issues. In March 2015, still primarily focused on the classical past, we brought together a group of speakers at the TRAC, held at Leicester University, UK. The lecture room was packed and we sensed the potential for a second session with a broader chronological remit. Hence, in December of that year, we organised a second session at the Theoretical Archaeology Group (TAG) meeting, held at the University of Bradford, UK. The session was deliberately intended to draw out a diversity of perspectives, and we were both amazed and delighted to discover so many colleagues working on aspects of our session theme.

The present volume features much-developed versions of some of the papers presented at the Leicester and Bradford sessions; several other fascinating contributions unfortunately could not be included due to the time constraints and other commitments of the speakers. Our thanks both to the conference organisers for accepting our sessions and to all the speakers, and audiences, for their engaging contributions. In addition to the chapters derived from the original conference sessions, we have invited a small number of other contributions to address particular gaps in our collective coverage. As the short biographies of our contributors demonstrate, the questions we posed around the relationship between archaeology and historical fiction attracted interest from a great variety of practitioners,

including archaeologists, novelists, playwrights, visual artists and poets, most with experience in more than one of these areas, and all eager to combine and experiment with these different skills.

One of the remarkable discoveries to emerge from our conversations is the striking amount of work that has already been undertaken on this topic when, simultaneously, it remains distinctly ‘fringe’ to wider archaeological research. One reason may be that much of this work is fragmented across different disciplines (e.g. archaeology, classics, creative writing, history) and the many geographical and chronological sub-disciplines of archaeology, as well as cognate areas such as outreach or teaching. One of the goals of this volume therefore is to provide a focus around which research, currently dispersed across disparate fields, may coalesce. Our intention is not only to facilitate discussion and understanding between those already working on these themes, but also to promote the wider visibility of the potential for the use of fictive techniques in archaeological research.

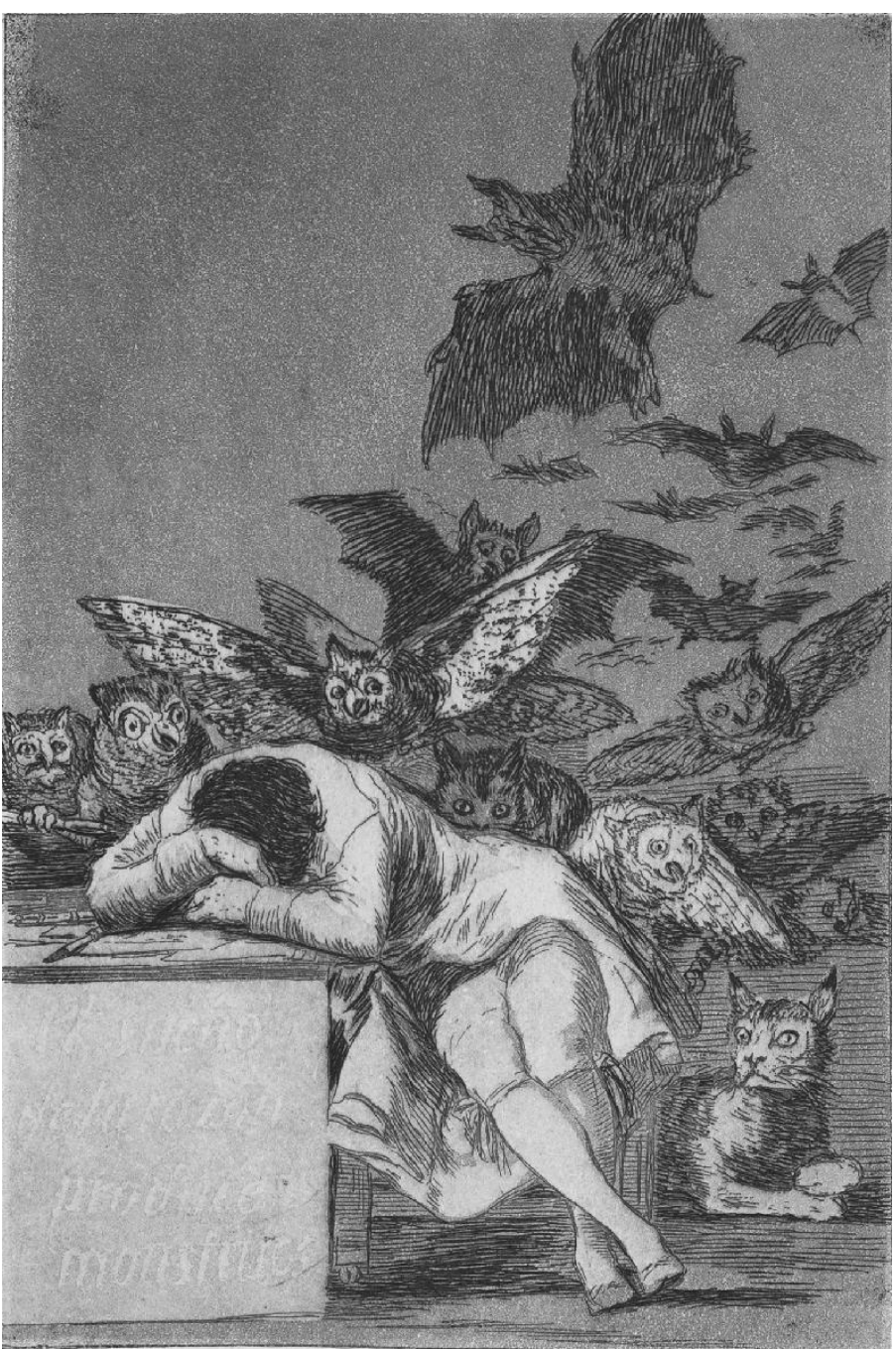
We would like to thank all of the contributors for the extensive and constructive discussions we have shared, both at the original conference sessions and in the subsequent preparation of this volume. By debating all of our drafts several times, and exploring everything from philosophy to punctuation, the resulting volume really is a concerted group effort. We would also like to thank our commissioning editor at Routledge, Matthew Gibbons, for giving us the opportunity to pursue this project, and Molly Marler, Katie Wakelin and Kangan Gupta for dealing with our many production queries. Most importantly, thanks to our families for putting up with us throughout the duration of the project, even when it took up family time or when we imposed on each other’s family lives.

Finally, in accordance with James Gibb’s suggestion ([Chapter 8](#)), we express gratitude to our archaeological subjects: we thank you for what you have left us and apologise for any harm that we unwillingly might have committed to your reputations and legacy.

Daniël van Helden, Utrecht

Robert Witcher, Durham

February 2019



1 Historical fiction and archaeological interpretation

Introduction

Archaeological stories

Humans are the ‘storytelling animal’ (Gottschall 2012). We weave narratives to shape and make sense of the world around us—past, present and future. Over the last 20 years, there has been a resurgence of interest across the humanities and social sciences in the role of narrative in the creation, communication and consumption of meaning; there are now also growing calls in the sciences to learn from this research and to harness the techniques of narrative storytelling for more effective presentation and dissemination of scientific research (e.g. Dahlstrom 2014; Martinez-Conde & Macknik 2017). At the intersection of the humanities and the sciences, archaeology has a particularly well-developed literature on the role of narrative, built on a long tradition of critical reflection on reasoning and writing about the material remains of the past (e.g. Evans 1989; Hodder 1989; Terrell 1990; Pluciennik 1999, 2015; Joyce et al. 2002; Holtorf 2010). In part, this attention reflects the challenges of working with rich but incomplete, and often ambiguous, archaeological evidence that both demands and defies ordering into meaningful accounts. The result has been great experimentation with, and analysis of, different narrative forms. It is one specific form—fictional narrative—that is the focus of the present volume.

Along with the 15 other contributors, our aim is to examine the intersection of archaeological research and historical fiction *sensu lato*. Historical novels, films and TV series present imagined narratives of periods and regions that often have been investigated thoroughly by archaeologists; indeed, some of these fictional accounts make extensive use of the results of archaeological research. Such imagined narratives often have been dismissed by archaeologists, either outright as fantastical tales or, more specifically, for particular misunderstandings or misrepresentations of the past. The latter, in fact, may be a constructive process, drawing the attention of archaeologists to neglected aspects of the past and prompting new and more rigorous research. But just as frequently, historians and archaeologists have welcomed these fictional narratives, both for ‘bringing the past to life’ for wider audiences and as objects of serious study in their own right (e.g. Wyke 1997; Smith 2001; Bernbeck 2005;

Mattingly 2011: 4–5; Cyrino 2015; Augoustakis & Cyrino 2016). Indeed, a number of professional archaeologists have turned their hands to novel writing, and many more have experimented in scholarly publications with forms that either resemble or make direct use of fictive techniques. The latter range from short fictional vignettes, intended to engage the reader or to exemplify specific points, through extended accounts that foreground marginalised groups, to imagined journeys that evoke the experiences and even emotions of past people. Often such fiction is used to disseminate to the public the final results of a research project or of an excavation (e.g. Cooper 2003; Leach et al. 2010; Savani et al. 2018), but these techniques also have been used as part of the research process and for communication with other archaeologists.

While recognising the importance of fiction as a means of public outreach, this volume focuses primarily on the use of fiction within the research process itself. Hence, it is concerned primarily with archaeologists as producers rather than consumers of fictive accounts. It also focuses on the epistemological and ethical aspects of integrating fictive techniques into archaeological thinking rather than the aesthetic or artistic value of the resulting fictions. In short, how can these techniques be used by archaeologists to achieve a better understanding of the past?

We start with two basic premises. First is the centrality of the imagination in the study of the past. Archaeologists excavate material traces from the ground and generate vast amounts of data, but these must be transformed into information and knowledge through a fundamentally creative process (see Edmonds 1999: x). Second, the aims and methods of archaeologists and historical novelists are more similar than the widespread and deeply rooted notion of ‘fact versus fiction’ allows. There are indeed important and meaningful distinctions between archaeological and fictive accounts of the past, but they are not fundamentally different (see Elphinstone & Wickham-Jones 2012: 536; cf. De Groot 2015: 13–22). These two premises allow us, temporarily at least, to put fictional and scholarly accounts on to the same analytical plane. Such equivalence may appear irresponsible, but as each of the contributors to this volume demonstrates, both archaeologists and most fiction writers maintain a fundamental commitment to the evidence and to advancing truthful accounts of the past. Far from arguing that evidence and emotion can be freely mixed—or are synonymous even—the contributors explore, and sometimes blur, but do not erase the distinction between fact and fiction.

The editors of a recent volume, *Subject and narrative in archaeology*, point to an “increasing clamor for and interest in alternative forms of archaeological narratives, involving [amongst others] writing fiction” (Van Dyke & Bernbeck 2015: 1). This claim is evidentially true, as demonstrated by the contributors to this volume, but it also requires context. First, the use of these fictional forms is still disputed, and, second, although interest has indeed increased, it is by no means new. In this introduction, we first explore the question of archaeological fact and fiction and the line that may or may not divide them. We move on to present case studies of the intertwining of archaeological research and fiction writing to demonstrate both the risks and the opportunities involved. We then present a selection of examples to establish the long history of the use of fictive techniques in archaeological accounts of the past. The second half of the introduction reviews some of the key fictive techniques used (e.g. vignettes, journeys) and discusses the authors’ motivations and intended outcomes. We then review some of the key objections and challenges to the use of fictive techniques, before outlining the contributors’ individual chapters. In neither this introduction nor across the volume as a whole have we attempted to impose any grand overarching theoretical framework for the use of fictive techniques in archaeology. Our aim is to draw attention to the scale and breadth of the use of these techniques and to hear from a diversity of contributors about their theoretical and methodological practices. In this way we hope to open up a space for the investigation of the potential of fictive techniques in the archaeological research process.

The borderline between archaeological fact and fiction

In the popular perception, there is a strong distinction between fact and fiction, and between their practitioners. The archaeologist is a scientist who discovers material traces of the past, analyses them rigorously and reports them objectively in scholarly site reports, replete with technical language, data, diagrams and references. In contrast, the novelist or filmmaker is an artist, inventing characters, dialogue and stories about the past. Hence, one informs, the other entertains; one discovers facts, the other makes them up. In more formal terms, there are perceived to be epistemological differences in the uses of evidence by, and truth claims of, archaeologists and the creators of historical fiction. Archaeologists generally reflect and reinforce, to varying degrees, this distinction of fact from fiction. Part

of the very origins of the discipline was a process of distancing and differentiating itself from antiquarianism and folklore and aligning with scientific developments such as evolutionary studies (Trigger 2006). To stray too far from objective description and analysis of the evidence, to move too close to the arts (see [Figure 1.1](#)), is to risk consorting with those who, with either good intent or bad, invent things about the past (e.g. Kristiansen 2011: 77). The archaeologist's responsibility is to the evidence and to the past; the novelist's is to his or her reader in the present.

Figure 1.1 The sleep of reason produces monsters (*El sueño de la razón produce monstruos*) by Francisco Goya. Plate 43 from *Los Caprichos*. Metropolitan Museum of Art, Creative Commons Attribution CC0 1.0 Universal

The discipline of archaeology as a whole therefore reflects wider anxieties about authority and the past, and works to reinforce the division of its own enterprise from that of historical fiction writing. Archaeological authority lies, at least in part, in maintaining disciplinary coherence and respectability via a well-policed borderline, and one does not need to look hard to find the border guards in action. Three examples—selected for no other reason than they were published in the same recent year and reflect work on varied archaeological contexts—demonstrate the case. Brian Holey (2015: 157) states “‘speculation’ is [...] carefully avoided by professional archaeologists, while ‘interpretation’ is acceptable if based upon evidence”. Claudia Sagona (2015: 92–93) argues that “imaginative forays into the sensual, emotive and subjective” risk “weaving untenable threads into the fabric of academic discussion”, and Dennis Harding (2015: ix) warns that “we should guard against allowing the ‘empathic’ approach to prehistory to take us beyond the limits of archaeological inference”. These statements introduce the terrain through which runs the borderline separating fact and fiction: on one side is interpretation and on the other imagination, and similarly, inference versus speculation and objectivity versus subjectivity. Although these examples are all recent, the borderline itself is far from new. Similar concerns can be found in the archaeological literature extending back for decades. Eighty years ago, for example, the Aegeanists Alan Wace and Carl Blegen (1939: 131) stated that “the archaeologist is or should be cautious [and] prefers to state the facts as he knows them quite frankly rather than indulge in free reconstruction of pre-history for which he sees little or no real

evidence". Indeed, the same basic conceptualisation of fact versus fiction can be traced back deep into the ancient Greek past, such as Aristotle's distinction of history and poetry and Thucydides' (1.20–23, see Węcowski 2008) critique of the fantastical elements in Herodotus' *Histories* (the latter intended as moral lessons of the past rather than a record of what happened).

The repeated articulation of such concerns in the archaeological literature over the last century illustrates both the perception and the policing of a line between scholarly archaeology and historical fiction. As will be demonstrated below, an important observation is that this borderline, and its maintenance, transcends wider trends in archaeological thinking through the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Whether in the culture-historical, processual or post-processual eras, the need to reaffirm the borderline reflects the persistent perceived threat to, and presumably crossing of, that line by fellow scholars whose methods are deemed inappropriate. Indeed, the uses of fiction, poetry, theatre and multimedia in some archaeological approaches over the past 25 years have been characterised collectively as, precisely, 'transgressive archaeologies' (Praetzelis 2015: 119–31; see Southgate 2009: 173–78 on the parallel debate in the study of history).

But how real or meaningful is the line threatened by such transgression? What distinguishes the craft of the archaeologist from that of the historical novelist? After all, they often write about the same periods, places and events and draw on the same evidence. Their specific written outputs (site reports versus novels) and their audiences (archaeologists versus the public) are largely distinct, but how different are their general aims and methods? In the words of archaeologist Stephen Lekson (2018: 191), "surely pre-history and good historical fiction will share some methodological chops? Both interpret, extrapolate from factors to sequences, causes, and narratives". The specific methods may vary—the use of statistics or the invention of dialogue—but the broader objectives and working practices demonstrate strong similarities. Indeed, a collaboration between the archaeologist Caroline Wickham-Jones and the novelist Margaret Elphinstone led them to the conclusion that the differences between archaeology and fiction writing are "generic not intrinsic" (Elphinstone & Wickham-Jones 2012: 536; see chapters by both of these authors in this volume). In other words, they are set apart by the specific practices of each genre rather than by their fundamentally different natures.

To explore these issues in more detail, we start in the next section with a discussion of two historical novels—*Salammbô* and *The Source*—examining the complex interrelations of archaeological fact and fiction. Specifically, *Salammbô* is used to demonstrate some of the risks involved when the line between archaeological and fictional accounts becomes blurred. Conversely, *The Source* offers an example of how the novelist can draw on archaeological evidence in ways that imitate those of the archaeologist, and even advance ideas that are only entertained by archaeologists many years later with the subsequent discovery of new evidence.

Historical novels and archaeology

Salammbô

For centuries, the past and its material remains have offered a rich source of inspiration for artists, poets and writers. Before the Enlightenment, their works freely mixed evidence and imagination, epitomised by Giovanni Battista Piranesi's fantastical views of ancient Rome. As a clearer distinction between 'fact' and 'fiction' began to crystallise, however, such works came under critique as "imaginative archaeology" (e.g. Murray 1888: 21) and were dismissed as liable to mislead. But the power of such representations is sometimes too deeply ingrained in the cultural imagination to disregard them. The risks of this interweaving of archaeological evidence and imagination, fact and fiction, is well illustrated by Gustave Flaubert's 1862 novel *Salammbô*. The novel is set in ancient Carthage in the years following the First Punic War and focuses on the daughter of the Carthaginian general, Hamilcar Barca. The book was a publishing sensation, not least because of its lurid scenes of child sacrifice. When Flaubert was drawn into a dispute with scholars of history, who questioned his depiction of Carthaginian life, he deferred to his literary source, Polybius' *Histories*, around which he freely developed his narrative (see Green 1982). At that time, no actual Phoenician infant cemeteries (*tophets*) had been discovered. It was only decades after the novel had been published that archaeologists located and excavated a child cemetery at Motya, Sicily. Joseph Whitaker's (1921: 12) publication of the excavations linked the child remains uncovered with "the terrible practice of human sacrifice". The following year, Charles Saumange reacted to what he perceived as Flaubert's undue influence on Whitaker's interpretation:

The imagination of the public haunted by Flaubert's memory, has promptly dramatized the discovery: these children [...] are the victims of cruel holocausts which Carthage offered to Moloch. This is an imprudent and grave step to take lightly. Imprudent because it is important to know the excavation perfectly and in all details before advancing such a thing even hypothetically. Grave because one compromises the rehabilitation which the religious reputation of Carthage has benefited from among a good number of our best historians.

(translated by Gras et al. 1991)

But it was too late. In 1921, Icard and Gielly discovered the *tophet* at Carthage, and its publication by Poinssot and Lantier (1923: 66) drew directly on Whitaker's interpretation:

It is only to the holocausts of the Syro-Palestinian countries that the immolations of human victims revealed by the excavations of Carthage and Motya can be compared. (authors' translation)

Hence, the archaeological evidence was intertwined with ancient sources and historical fiction from the moment it emerged from the ground. The debate as to whether or not the Carthaginians practised child sacrifice and the question of exactly how to interpret the archaeological evidence continues to the present (e.g. Smith et al. 2011, 2013; Schwartz et al. 2012, 2017; Xella et al. 2013). Child sacrifice, and the broader context of Orientalist attitudes towards the Semitic Phoenicians, makes this case particularly compelling. But there are plenty of other examples of how such fictional narratives shape both the general public's and archaeologists' understanding of the past.

Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island* (1883), for example, mediated through subsequent novels and films, has had a powerful influence on the archaeology of piracy. Skowronek and Ewen (2016: 193–207) demonstrate how this classic pirate story shaped ideas about historical piracy and powerfully, if subtly, predisposed expectations about the types of shipwrecks and artefacts that we might, or might not, expect to find in the archaeological record. Indeed, as with the example of *Salammbô*, it is noticeable that many literary tropes about the past that continue to influence both popular and archaeological thinking today, were established by novelists and other artists in the nineteenth century.

In organising the original conference sessions from which the present volume derives, it was suggested to us that professional archaeologists should actively avoid reading or watching historical fiction lest we confuse the real with the imagined. Others have expressed similar concerns. Michael E. Smith (2001), for example, relates how, initially at least, he abandoned reading Gary Jennings' 1980 *Aztec* because he found himself confusing the "facts" with the "plausible details" added by the novelist. But, as the problem of *Treasure Island* suggests, it is difficult to live in cultural isolation; we can be influenced by such tropes even without having read these fictions (for the general inseparability of history and fiction, see Southgate 2009: 20; see also Crossland 2015: 104–107 on how fictional imaginings of forensic anthropology are drawn back into the field itself). Instead, the identification, exposure and critique of these accounts, and the literary tropes they perpetuate, should form an integral part of good archaeological practice (e.g. on Neanderthal novels, see Hackett & Dennell 2003).

The Source

The example of *Salammbô* demonstrates the potentially insidious influence of historical fiction on archaeological thinking. But can historical novels also have archaeological value? In other words, as well as entertaining, inspiring and confusing archaeologists, can the historical novelist engage with the past and its material remains in ways that parallel those of the archaeologist, or even demonstrate potential as a research methodology? Can the imaginary world of the historical novel allow novelists to generate ideas or advance possibilities that are archaeologically useful? Here, we focus on a single historical novel of extraordinary chronological sweep, from the early Holocene to the 1960s: James Michener's (1965) *The Source*. Although it was not Michener's most successful novel, it was nonetheless a bestseller and highly influential, inspiring students to study archaeology and archaeologists to write their own novels (e.g. Nelson 2015a).

Ostensibly, the novel addresses the history of the Jewish people as experienced by the population of the fictional site of Tell Makor. It is, however, far more ambitious in scope and complex in structure than an account of a single religious and cultural group. The narrative moves back and forth between the early 1960s, when the tell site is under excavation by archaeologists, and the past and the people and events the archaeologists are uncovering. The temporal gap between

past and present is bridged by specific archaeological objects and buildings, which the reader is privileged to see both as they are used and deposited, and then as they are found and interpreted thousands of years later. The text is rich in the politics of archaeology, acutely sensitive to the taphonomic processes that create the archaeological record and it explores some of the big questions that motivate archaeologists: migration, technology, economy and religion, including child sacrifice.

Each chapter of the book is named after its associated archaeological stratum. Here, we use the example of Chapter/Level XV (The Bee Eater), set in 9831 bc. The protagonist is Ur, an old man experiencing an era of great change. The chapter explores a series of archaeological topics including the domestication of plants and animals; the emergence of religion (from animism to polytheism); the concepts of home and property; and tensions within and between social groups. Michener, for example, links the experiments of Ur's wife gathering, transplanting and finally sowing wild grains with Ur's existential concerns about the reduced role of hunting, increased sedentism, the move from a cave and the construction of a 'house', and the need to placate the supernatural forces that threaten his crops.

Michener drew on archaeological sources and, indeed, his characters reference actual excavations such as those of Kathleen Kenyon at Jericho, undertaken only a few years earlier. In relation to Level XV, he made use of new ideas and discoveries that were radically changing archaeological interpretations. During the mid-twentieth century, V.G. Childe's (1936) concept of the Neolithic Revolution was the dominant interpretative paradigm. Childe posited that the domestication of plants (initially in southern Mesopotamia) led to the settling of humans in permanently occupied places. Yet, as Michener was writing, this theory was in the process of being overturned by discoveries such as those of Dorothy Garrod (1932) at the Shuqba Cave in the West Bank. Here, Garrod identified a Mesolithic culture dating to c. 12,500 to 9500 bc, characterised by hunter-gatherers who lived in permanent settlements; this she labelled the 'Natufian'. Discoveries such as this allowed Michener to incorporate the origins of domestication—previously located 1,000 kilometres to the east—into his narrative of Israel.

Michener therefore made use of recent archaeological work. He was not, however, limited by it. Ur and his family, for example, eager to placate the storm god after their first crops are damaged, erect a monolith. In Michener's account, this monumental act is associated

with the very beginnings of agriculture. At the time of writing, however, no archaeologist believed that monumentality could be traced back to the tenth millennium bc. It is unclear whether this megalithic act is simply a device to advance the plot or the logical outcome of working through the evidence and its implications within the framework of the fictional narrative. Either way, many years after the novel was published, the discovery at Göbekli Tepi, Turkey, of a series of stone enclosures surrounding T-shaped central pillars richly carved with symbols, dating back to the tenth millennium bc, provides evidence of precisely the same date as Michener's Level XV. Crucially, as no evidence for domesticated crops or animals has been found at the site, Göbekli Tepi has been interpreted as a monumental sanctuary built by hunter-gatherers, which in turn led to the domestication of local wild wheat to supply ritual feasts (Dietrich et al. 2012).

Whether or not Michener 'predicted' such early monumentality is debatable. More broadly, however, his fictional account of the domestication processes can be seen to challenge monocausal and teleological explanations (i.e. that domestication led to sedentism, or that religious practices led to domestication). Instead, Michener portrays the co-evolution of domestication, settlement and religious ideas as individual people think, experiment, make mistakes, learn and pass on these ideas to their descendants. In this way, Michener's model of false starts and failed experiments more closely reflects twenty-first-century thinking on the social aspects of domestication than anything written in the mid- to late twentieth century (for an overview, see Shennan 2018: 47–55).

To be clear, the social and economic changes imagined by Michener in Level XV are impossibly compressed into the lifespan (indeed, the later life) of a single man. No archaeologist would attribute such changes to the 'genius' of an individual human or argue that these could have been accomplished within the span of a few years. Not least, it is now clear that there were multiple centres of domestication and that these agro-pastoral transitions were drawn out across millennia (e.g. Colledge et al. 2013). But Michener's narrative endeavours to open up the 'black boxes' of concepts such as domestication and approaches them in terms of the everyday lives of the people that brought about such processes through numerous false starts, failed experiments and unintended outcomes (on the need for finer-resolution chronologies to enable human-scale narratives, see Whittle 2018).

Moreover, Michener is also effective at combining narratives of

different scale. Archaeologists often stress the importance of working between large, long-term processes and the actions of individual human agents in order better to capture the range of possible explanations (e.g. Edmonds 1999: x; Hodder 1999: 143–47; Robb & Harris 2013: 222). In practice, however, they often struggle to do so. In this sense, Michener’s account of the economic, social and cognitive changes that followed the last Ice Age makes use of narrative techniques such as characterisation and motive in ways that archaeology would only arrive at some decades later (see below).

Michener’s novel is also notable for its structure, shifting back and forth between the past and the present and integrating dialogue between the excavators. In this way, it directly resembles, but significantly predates, Hodder’s (1989: 273) manifesto for a new type of site report “as a complex interweaving of sequences of events in the past (what happened on the site) and sequences of events in the present (what happened on the excavation)”. Hodder was looking back to antiquarian reports for his inspiration and there appears to be no genealogical link to *The Source*. The convergence of Hodder and Michener on the same narrative form, and for more or less the same purpose, therefore appears to be coincidental, but arguably the novelist’s freedom to experiment allowed Michener to do this decades before Hodder (similarly, Southgate 2009: 124–25 discusses how novelists anticipated such narrative shifts by scholars of history).

The Source suggests that novelists can do more than simply invent stories around archaeological facts; they can also suggest new ways of thinking, pointing towards interpretative possibilities that archaeologists have not yet entertained. Some other novels have made more specific ‘predictions’. For example, Vellanoweth (2016: 208) notes that a fictional site featured in O’Dell’s 1960 novel *Island of the Blue Dolphins* was subsequently ‘verified’ by the discovery of archaeological materials (see also Elphinstone, this volume). It is difficult, if not impossible, to know whether these are coincidences or whether they might, in some cases, attest to a more fundamental appreciation of the logic of the underlying evidence. But it is precisely this working through of the material, bridging gaps in the data with informed conjecture, following the logic of characters, events and ideas, that forms one of the main justifications for the use of fictive techniques by archaeologists. The following section therefore turns from historical novels to a select history of the use of fictive techniques in the archaeological literature and considers how, and why, some archaeologists have incorporated fictive techniques into

their accounts of the past.

The long history of fictive techniques in archaeology

The previous section considered the relationship between historical novels and the archaeological theory and practice. In this section, we consider the use of fictive techniques by archaeologists themselves. A not-inconsiderable number of archaeologists have penned full-length novels (see Nelson 2003), with some authoring specifically historical fiction, including Lindsay Allason-Jones (2000, *Roman Woman*) and Sarah Nelson (1999, *Spirit Bird Journey*), as well as Victoria Thompson (V.M. Whitworth, e.g. 2012, *The Bone Thief*, see also Savani & Thompson, this volume) and Mark Patton (e.g. 2012, *Undreamed Shores*, see also Patton this volume). Here, however, we focus on examples of fictive techniques deployed by archaeologists within the scholarly research literature. In other words, we explicitly exclude novels in order to concentrate on the motivations and methods for the use of fictive techniques as part of the research process itself. We start by demonstrating that, far from representing a new or recent development, such techniques have been used by archaeologists for decades. We then discuss the variety of techniques deployed and consider the authors' motivations and justifications.

One of the most famous pieces of imaginative archaeological writing can be found in Sir Mortimer Wheeler's 1943 report on his excavations at Maiden Castle, Dorset. It is a passage widely cited in anthologies of archaeological writing (e.g. Connah 2010: 29–31), and Brian Fagan (2010: 25) says that Wheeler told him these were “the hardest paragraphs he ever wrote”. In the report, Wheeler narrates the storming of the Iron Age hill fort by the Roman army.

Indeed, something less than imagination is now required to reconstruct the main sequence of events at the storming of Maiden Castle, for the excavation of the eastern entrance has yielded tangible evidence of it. With only a little amplification it may be reconstructed as follows. [...] Men and women, young and old, were savagely cut down before the legionaries were called to heel and the work of systematic destruction began. [...] That night, when the fires of the legion shone out (we may imagine) in orderly lines across the valley, the survivors crept forth from their broken stronghold and, in the darkness, buried their dead.

The larger imagined scene concludes with the statement “So much for the story; now for its basis” (ibid., 61–62), with which, Wheeler moves on to present the supporting archaeological evidence. But though Wheeler appears to be dismissive of his own ‘story’, this very passage features in Wheeler’s later autobiography, where it is favourably contrasted with other aspects of the *Maiden Castle* report that he claims subsequently he would have done differently (Wheeler 1955: 105–108). Some insight into Wheeler’s mindset comes from his 1939 review of R.G. Collingwood and Myres’ (1936) *Roman Britain and the English Settlements*, published a few years before the *Maiden Castle* report:

Mr Collingwood has adopted a personal and subjective attitude towards History that must either be accepted or rejected by the reader at the outset. [...] He interpolates motives, builds characters, constructs episodes with a liberality or even licence that is great fun, but is liable to shock the pedant. Fact and speculation stand shoulder to shoulder, no documents are cited, the innocent student may know not with what voice his author speaks.

(Wheeler 1939: 87–88).

That Wheeler would charge Collingwood in this way is unsurprising. Collingwood’s (1994) ‘re-enactment doctrine’ involved reconstructing thought processes, thereby accessing past motives and actions (see van Helden & Witcher, this volume). By occupying the historical actor’s place as thinker-of-the-thought, the actual historical thought is present in the scholar’s mind. For Collingwood, this was an objective process—an act of imagination but not of invention. Wheeler undoubtedly did not see his account of Maiden Castle in the same light; the evidence, after all, was so unambiguous that “something less than imagination” was required to reconstruct the sequence of events. But did the evidence really speak for itself? Subsequent studies have outlined the potential for alternative interpretations demonstrating that the evidence did not automatically assemble (or ‘emplot’; White 1973) itself into narrative form (Todd 1984; Sharples 1991: 124–25). Perhaps most significant is that Wheeler (1955: 108) himself characterises his account as a form of tragic narrative, but if the evidence spoke for itself, would it have done so for a moral purpose and through the adoption of a literary form? What really separates Collingwood’s ‘speculation’ from Wheeler’s approach? However we

answer this question, Wheeler himself articulates, both in his own work and in his critique of Collingwood, the well-rehearsed concerns about the use of imagination in scholarly accounts and the transgressing of the line between fact and fiction.

Wheeler's *Maiden Castle* is considered a classic account, but is far from unique. A number of similar 'amplifications', to use Wheeler's term (e.g. Persson 1931: 68–70), and more explicitly imaginative accounts (e.g. Lilliu 1963: 207–10), were published during the first two-thirds of the twentieth century. The proponents of New or Processual archaeology, however, took aim at precisely this type of thinking and writing. David Clarke (1968: 11–12), for example, forcefully argued:

It is this attempt to convey smooth historical narrative as the essence of prehistoric studies, in the total absence of the record appropriate to that art and in the presence of records of a quite peculiar and especial nature—the artefacts, which we might well view as “counterfeit” history. The expression of archaeological results may call for nicely written historical narrative but this is a matter of choosing one particular vehicle to convey results obtained by quite alien methods. The danger of historical narrative as a vehicle for archaeological results is that it pleases by virtue of its smooth coverage and apparent finality, whilst the data on which it is based are never comprehensive, never capable of supporting but one interpretation and rest upon complex probabilities. Archaeological data are not historical data and consequently archaeology is not history.

In place of narrative, fictional or otherwise, Clarke argued for archaeology as a science—objective, testable and falsifiable, the antithesis of culture-historical archaeology. Clarke's approach, for example, demanded that assumptions and methods were made explicit in order that other archaeologists could follow the workings and ultimately improve on them. This is the exact opposite of the process of writing historical fiction; novelists work actively to conceal rather than foreground their methods and materials in order to maintain the reader's suspension of disbelief. Yet, in explicitly deploying fictive techniques within archaeological research, there is the potential for them to act as testable hypotheses, that is, models that seek logically to integrate the strands of evidence and which can then be tested against alternative explanations or other datasets (see Gibb, this

volume). In this sense, the differences between the aims and methods of processual archaeology and the use of fictive techniques may be less stark than they first appear (for an evaluation of Clarke, see Chapman & Wylie 2016: 133–36).

The reaction of the post-processualists to Clarke's archaeology focused, in part, on the critique of its detached, scientific methods and style of writing (e.g. Hodder 1989; Mickel 2012a, 2012b). This critique echoes concerns raised decades earlier by the likes of Jacquetta Hawkes (1968: 258), who was troubled by the rise of scientific reports that “bar all individuality from their pages”. It is therefore unsurprising that the post-processualists should have looked back to some of the ideas of the pre-processual era. Ian Hodder (1986: 353), for example, turned to Collingwood to reassert archaeology as a form of history rather than natural science (though he subsequently moved away from Collingwood, Hodder 1991: 7).

The post-processual shift from the generalising to the particular, from processes to people, was associated with a proliferation of experimental methods and forms of archaeological writing. The intention here is not to reproduce an outdated notion of a progression from culture history through to post-processual/interpretative theoretical enlightenment (critiqued in Bintliff & Pearce 2011), but rather to demonstrate that the use of, and concerns about, fictive techniques in archaeological writing rise above the prevailing theoretical paradigms of the past century. Without doubt, however, the post-processual shift has given particular impetus to a wide range of experimentation in archaeological writing including fictive narrative forms. This is a trend that continues into the current period of theoretical *bricolage* (e.g. Harris & Cipolla 2017). In sum, the use of fictive techniques—and the reactions to them—has a long history of use in archaeology. The justifications for, and objections to, their use appear to transcend broader theoretical shifts; instead, the same basic division of fact and fiction is reframed within the prevailing debate of each era.

Fictive techniques in archaeological writing

A variety of fictive techniques have been employed in archaeological writing. In this section, we discuss the principal categories, focusing on more recent publications, but also drawing on ‘classic’ texts to flag up particularly significant examples.

Vignettes

The most widely used fictive device found in the archaeological literature of the past 30 years is the vignette or short imagined scene. The classic example is James Deetz's (1977: 1–4) influential *In small things forgotten: an archaeology of early American life*, which uses vignettes of everyday activities such as individuals cooking, farming and carving tombstones. In support of his wider objectives, these short scenes are used to focus attention on the importance of everyday material culture, at once fundamental to what archaeologists do, but at the same time frequently neglected. In a similar vein, Francis Pryor (2003: 164–68) uses imagined scenes as a means to suggest how monumental enclosures “might have come into being”. Similarly, Rebecca Yamin (1998: 84–85) offers vignettes as a way both of presenting and “knowing” which “forces the scholar to go out on a limb—to interpret what it all might mean”, and Guy Middleton (2017: 397) offers a reconstruction of a Mycenaean royal funeral, arguing that it helps us “to interpret and explicate the archaeology more richly by allowing us to generate imaginative and plausible scenarios of events and the lived experiences of past people.”

Such fictive scenes, however, have been used with a wide spectrum of specified purposes. Michael Given (2004: 5), for example, starts each chapter of his monograph on colonised populations with imagined scenarios intended to communicate the experiences of the colonised and to build “a relationship between a reader and a book, through identification and sympathy”. Conversely, Robin Skeates (2010: 7) presents vignettes towards the ends of his chapters, elaborating on his scholarly analysis of the senses in prehistoric Malta; he argues that these passages are “intended to stimulate new thoughts and questions about what life felt like in the past”. Another book on the senses also uses vignettes as “fragments of material and sensuous life-worlds, hopefully retaining and conveying the texture and carnality of inter-subjective and trans-corporeal experience” (Hamilakis 2013: 130). As well as the aim to build sympathy and empathy (see van Helden & Witcher, this volume), other uses of vignettes include attempts to evoke past landscapes: for example, in *The remembered land*, Jim Leary (2015: 15) leads the reader around Northsealand (or Doggerland), now submerged beneath the North Sea, to help visualise an otherwise invisible landscape and to show that it was a dynamic and inhabited place. Others have used vignettes more formally to explore the logic, or the inadequacies, of interpretative

frameworks. Neal Ferris (1999), for example, offers “interpretative imaginings” as part of his critique of the dominant interpretations of the Iroquoian life in southern Ontario during the Late Woodland period. Many other examples of fictional vignettes can be found, deployed across a wide range of archaeological periods and regions and with varied objectives, including Ruth Tringham (1991: 124), Carmel Schrire (1995: 117), Kathryn Kamp (1998), Mark Edmonds (1999), Martin Henig (2002), Rosemary Joyce et al. (2002: 146–50) and Alex Butterworth and Ray Laurence (2006).

Travel through time

A particular fictive device concerns the use of time-travelling observers. In *After the ice: a global human history, 20,000–5000 bc*, Steven Mithen (2003: 5) argues that a conventional, archaeological account of the early Holocene would be ‘dry’ and that “a more accessible and appealing history is one that provides a narrative about people’s lives; one that addresses the experience of living in the past and recognises human action as the cause of social and economic change”. To escape the deadening hand of the all-knowing narrator, Mithen sends a time-traveller to witness, though not interact with, people at the end of the Ice Age. A similar device is used by Keith Hopkins in *A world full of gods* (1999), sending back modern students to experience life in Pompeii. In this example, the travellers are not simply another set of eyes through which to view and describe the city. They also engage with its inhabitants, illustrating the gaps in understanding between past and present, for instance, around slavery and religion.

Another example of this device is Janet Spector’s (1993: 63) *What this awl means: feminist archaeology at a Wahpeton Dakota Village*, in which she offers “informed speculation” about the significance of the archaeological discovery of a bone awl. Specifically, Spector aims to step aside from her own Eurocentric perspective and advance beyond the limitations of the data in order to achieve a better understanding of the past: “I sometimes imagine being transported into the past by a bilingual, bicultural, bitemporal guide—a Dakota person willing and able to explain to me his or her view of the area’s politics, tensions, and interactions” (ibid., 63). Notably, these fictional elements attracted little attention at the time of publication (though see Grover 1993; Rothschild 1996); only later was Spector’s approach critiqued for the ethical implications of its fictionalisation of historical individuals (Joyce et al. 2002: 125).

Travel through space

As well as using fictive techniques to allow the reader to travel through time, accounts dealing with movement through space have proved particularly attractive to archaeologists. Some build firmly, but evocatively, on specific evidence to animate and humanise the archaeological data. Others more explicitly imagine (usually) pedestrians as they move through landscapes or buildings with the aim of reconstructing experiences, linking disparate pieces of evidence, analysing spatial relationships or demonstrating specific points of interpretation.

A vignette by Leary (2014: 1) elaborates a scene around a series of footprints left in the tidal mud of Mesolithic Britain:

On a warm summer's day, four young adults set off along the edge of an estuary foreshore. They walk alongside one another heading southeast. With every step their bare feet sink into the soft estuarine mud which squeezes and squelches as they move. They stride at a brisk pace. At one stage, one of them sees something and veers left, crossing the paths of the others and causing them to momentarily bunch together before spreading out once more. Four lines of flow: weaving, interacting and mingling together.

This passage is based firmly on the evidence for specific, if anonymous, individuals and their movement across a particular landscape at a defined moment in time. It is more literary than fictional, but evokes intimacy with the experience of past people and their social lives (for a similar treatment, see Macfarlane 2013: 359). Also concerned with movement and experience, rather than imagination, are phenomenological accounts. Among these, the studies of Christopher Tilley (1994, 2008) are foundational. His earlier work, for example, describes the experience of moving along the Dorset Cursus and the kinetic responses to the rise and fall of the land and the reactions of the pedestrian to the ways in which other monuments come in and out of view. The purpose of this and other phenomenological accounts, drawing in particular on the work of Martin Heidegger, is to access the lived experience and meanings of these landscapes as produced and reproduced through routinised movement. Unlike the vignettes described above, these are not fictive accounts; rather, they use the experiences of the archaeologist in the present to access the experiences of people in the past (for critiques, see Brück 2005; Fleming 2006). Yet, in seeking to walk in the

footsteps of these earlier people, and to understand the landscape as it may have been understood by them, we move into territory—narrative, emotions and senses—shared with those using fictive techniques.

Sue Hamilton and colleagues similarly explore the ‘sensory worlds’ of Neolithic southern Italy during the late sixth millennium bc, reconstructing journeys from an area of dense settlement on the Tavoliere plain up into the foothills of the Gargano to visit the Scaloria cave for burial and cult purposes (Hamilton et al. 2006, 2016). Their imagined journeys identify the sensory contrasts of moving from the world of the everyday to the underworld, with familiar reference points (e.g. light, birdsong) replaced in the dark cave by heightened senses of touch and smell. The journey from dry open landscape to wet underground space “would generate states of confusion, struggle, disorientation, surprise, and revelation” (Hamilton et al. 2016: 105). These latter concepts begin to move beyond the strict limits of the evidence and allow readers to think “what the experience of visiting Grotta Scaloria during the Neolithic might have been like” (ibid., 107). Explicitly, the authors view these reconstructions as the means through which to generate new questions about the archaeology. In a similar exercise, Van Dyke (2015: 94) offers a creative representation and sensory engagement with the landscape of Chaco Canyon, New Mexico, imagining a young Pueblo girl on her first pilgrimage to Chaco. The intention is to “help us ask new questions and see relationships that might not otherwise be apparent”.

Paralleling, rather than deriving from, such phenomenological studies, other accounts of journeys are more overtly fictional, setting out to narrate the experiences of past people—real or invented—rather than those of the archaeologist. Bronwen Riley’s (2015) *Journey to Britannia: from the heart of Rome to Hadrian’s Wall, ad 130*, for example, provides an extended account of a fictional journey of the province’s incoming governor, Sextus Julius Severus, as he travels from Hadrianic Rome to the Empire’s northern frontier. Julius Severus is attested in the historical sources as the provincial governor, but Riley’s account of his journey is entirely fictional, drawing on archaeological evidence, which is densely documented in the endnotes. Her intention is “to evoke a journey” and “to capture the flavour of life” (ibid., 15). We do not, however, learn much about Julius Severus, who never evolves as a character, as would be expected in a novel. He is simply a device that allows the reader to

experience the past at a specific time and place.

In contrast, Diane Favro (1996) presents two narratives reconstructing the experiences of pedestrians moving through the streets of ancient Rome, from the Forum along the Via Flaminia to the Milvian Bridge in 52 bc and then, in reverse, back to the Forum in ad 14. Embedded within an analysis of how Rome was transformed under the emperor Augustus, Favro's imagined walks are used to highlight how the cityscape was transformed during the intervening 66 years and its effects on the viewer. Explicitly fictive techniques are required here for several reasons: the route today is covered by modern Rome and we do not have knowledge of every ancient building and monument at any specific moment in time. Perhaps most importantly, however, Favro's aim is to explore what the changes in this monumental landscape meant to ancient Romans—people who had lived through historical events and carried memories. In other words, rather than automata designed to operationalise a sequence of stimulus responses, her imagined pedestrians have individual biographies that shape their reading of monuments and their significance. Other imagined journeys are used with more specifically analytical intent. Eric Poehler (2017: 189–215), for example, uses the invented character of Sabinus, as a “narrative vehicle”, not only to “enliven some of the deep archaeological detail” (ibid., 192) of Pompeii but more specifically to evaluate between a series of overlapping hypotheses about how traffic was managed in the ancient city.

Biographies

Favro's pedestrians are significant as they are not simply devices that allow the reader to see the past world through someone else's eyes but are also individuals (or characters) complete with memories and biographies. Nonetheless, they remain inventions. In contrast, another area in which fictive techniques have been used concerns biographies built around ‘real’ individuals from the past. The term ‘real’ is used here to differentiate between the invented and idealised individuals of phenomenological accounts, with their universal bodies and emotions, and the remains of actual individuals excavated from the ground, with their unique physical forms and histories. Arguably, archaeologists have been slow to recognise, or at least to operationalise, the potential of personal microhistory or biography on the basis of human remains. This may, in part, reflect the fact that most human archaeological remains are treated as acultural, biological materials, depersonalised

and subject to population-level analysis of stature, disease or violence. Indeed, archaeology as a whole tends to work at larger scales: processes, cultures and societies, rather than individuals. Yet, through techniques such as isotope analysis and ancient DNA, we can now learn about individuals and their life courses in greater detail than ever. Fictive techniques offer one way to move between population-level epidemiological accounts, such as the prevalence of malaria, and insights into individuals, such as the effects of that malaria on individual lives.

Alexis Boutin has advanced an ‘osteobiographical’ approach to the bioarchaeology of personhood that uses fictive narratives, preceded by detailed scientific accounts, to examine the embodied life course of individuals. One of these osteobiographies (Boutin 2016) focuses on a young woman from Dilmun (Bahrain) of the early second millennium bc, whose varied skeletal pathologies are used to imagine scenes around her birth, life and death. Boutin also builds an approach that works between large and small scales. The unusually good condition of the woman’s teeth compared with those of the wider population, for example, is linked to her diet, rich in protein (fish) rather than dates, which is imagined to be the result of the special care the woman was afforded. On another level, these accounts begin to provoke emotional responses, such as sympathy or pity (e.g. Boutin 2012).

Plays and diaries

Two final specific fictive forms concern plays or scenes imagined in the form of invented dialogue and diaries. In both cases, a particular concentration of interest has developed in the context of North American historical archaeology. Pioneers of playwriting, archaeologists Adrian and Mary Praetzellis, have used imagined dialogue, with some stage directions, to elucidate life in a variety of colonial North American contexts (e.g. Praetzellis et al. 1997; Praetzellis & Praetzellis 2015). The intention here has been both to find engaging new ways to present the results of archaeological research and to use these approaches more formally as part of the research process itself. Gibb (2000), in particular, has used playwriting, which involves inventing characters and setting them loose within specific scenarios based on archaeological and documentary sources, and allowing his creations to interact and develop independently. In a process that resembles agent-based modelling, Gibb sets the parameters, runs the experiment and

evaluates the results in order to understand not simply how the past might have been, but also to understand causation (see Gibb, this volume, for an extension of this approach into earlier periods).

Another use of such fictional dialogue, this time in a British context, integrates archaeological and documentary evidence to explore the lives of the inhabitants of an excavated post-medieval house in Wales, highlighting gaps in the perceptions and understandings between past and present (Mytum 2010). Meanwhile, back in the US context, Beaudry (1998) has integrated similarly diverse sources of evidence in the form of fictional diary entries. In all of these cases, the concentration on the historical (US) or post-medieval (UK) periods provides a greater abundance of source material, as well as tangible, even named, individuals around whom to develop narratives (for a series of microhistories or biographies of inhabitants of historical New York, see various chapters in Janowitz & Dallal 2013). For this period, the gap between past and present in terms of cultural difference is also much less than compared with, for example, the Palaeolithic. Conversely, although we may assume familiarity with the people of the past five centuries, it is easy to assume greater acquaintance than is strictly warranted, even for very recent periods (see below, and Gibb this volume).

This necessarily selective overview provides a sense of the diversity and abundance of archaeological accounts that have made use of fictive techniques. Beyond their shared lack of satisfaction with the standard site report format, each of the authors has been motivated to use these techniques with a particular purpose. The next section reviews the range of stated objectives, from giving a voice to marginalised groups through to formal evaluation of alternative scenarios and hypotheses.

Fictional motivations

The most basic, and perhaps most common, stated objective for the use of fictive techniques is to ‘show’ rather than ‘tell’ (Joyce et al. 2002: 122; see Kavanagh, this volume). Instead of, or in addition to, the description of data and the explanation of details, it is possible to demonstrate connections, causation or effects. This may illustrate a point more effectively, though it need not lead to any greater insight into the past. More ambitiously, the re-presentation of data or ideas in an alternative format may stimulate new and different understanding for both the author and the reader. In much the same way that

watching a historical drama may cause the viewer to become conscious of particular aspects of the past, formal studies suggest that engaging differently with the same information may result in new perspectives (e.g. Green et al. 2004: 165–66 in relation to fiction). Clearly this is not an exclusive argument for the use of fictive techniques, but central to the effectiveness of the process is the role of narrative, which is processed differently from non-narrative information (Green & Brock 2000).

Another commonly stated objective for the use of fictive techniques is the importance of foregrounding people rather than processes. Many of the core themes of archaeological research—domestication, social complexity, technology, trade and exchange—are conceptualised and examined in high-level and abstract ways that neglect the human individuals and groups involved. Archaeologists often struggle to refine the spatial and temporal resolution of their accounts due to the nature of the data and, even where this is possible, there are questions as to how the different scales of data can be integrated. Fictive techniques offer one way of working through the data on a human scale. Of course, none of these concepts can be understood solely in terms of any individual's life, but fictive techniques encourage engagement with the human-scale actions that aggregate across time and space into large-scale processes (Hodder 1999: 143). Using anthropocentric narrative, relating specific objects or outcomes to human actions, also provides structure and meaning to descriptive detail (Grethlein & Huitink 2017).

Drawing attention to, and making visible, particular groups of people is another well-cited reason for the use of fictive techniques. In seeking to focus on groups marginalised or missing in traditional narratives, including women, children and slaves, archaeologists have found great potential in fictive accounts (e.g. Tringham 1991: 94). In many ways, the archaeological record is better suited to the identification of silent or subaltern peoples than are documentary sources, but the material record is still uneven and often insubstantial, and fiction offers a powerful medium for amplifying this evidence and making these groups more prominent.

In shifting from processes to people, fictive techniques have an obvious attraction as characters lie at the heart of historical fiction. Such people, however, can be evoked in different ways, for example, first- versus third-person narrative. The presentation of fictional journeys, inviting the reader to travel alongside a protagonist and to experience the world from within, is a particularly well-used fictive

technique. By looking at the world in the same way as a past inhabitant we may even begin to ‘think’ like them, for example, about where to locate a camp or how to attack or defend a hill fort. Some of these accounts attempt to go even further, not only to immerse the reader in a past world but also actively to put the reader into the shoes of another person and to experience their cognitive and emotional perspectives (see van Helden & Witcher, this volume).

Another stated reason for creating fictional accounts is that it compels the archaeologist to engage deeply with the evidence base. As archaeologists and novel writers Michael Gear and Kathleen O’Neal Gear (2003: 26–27) note, “the process will sharpen your wits and skills [as] fiction [...] takes you in directions you never would have considered and poses problems that the archaeologist must solve in order to continue the story”. Writing even the briefest vignette to animate the archaeological evidence is hard work due to the new and profound attentiveness to the material required and an alertness to its ambiguity, incompleteness and formal limits (see Beaudry 2013: ix). Fictive techniques may then offer some means of addressing the inadequacies of, or gaps in, the archaeological record. But historical fiction itself is rarely about creating complete worlds; indeed, a common problem is “the archaeological virus” (see Savani & Thompson and Wickham-Jones, this volume)—the dead hand of excessive archaeological detail in pursuit of accuracy and commitment to the data (see also Beaudry 2013: vii–viii). Hence, whereas the process of writing a fictional scene requires detailed engagement with the data, the fictional scene itself does not. (Historical) fiction works by the creation of vivid and credible worlds, rather than authentic and complete ones (see Elphinstone, this volume). The categorisation of fictive techniques discussed above concentrates on the form of the end products. These outputs, however, may be incidental to the research process itself. Fictive techniques, for example, can be used to model logical relationships between sources of evidence, to explore the potential implications of different scenarios or to evaluate causation. As with the above examples, fictive techniques are only one way in which this can be achieved, but they are particularly effective at concentrating attention on human agency.

A final specific motivation for the use of fictive techniques concerns the need to challenge teleological thinking. Archaeology, and history more broadly, is often deceived by the gift of hindsight. We know how history played out, but past people did not. Action (or inaction) that seems inexplicable today may be perfectly rational when considered

within a contemporaneous frame of reference, with all the incomplete knowledge and uncertainties entailed. Understanding the past, and causation in particular, therefore requires examination of decisions and actions in the context in which they were experienced alongside consideration of the alternatives not chosen (Hassig 2001; Grethlein 2010: 322–32, 2014). In short, we need to forget the ending. Counterfactual history is one approach to this problem (Ferguson 1998; Grethlein 2010: 325–27; though see Collins 2007 on the limited imagination of writers of counterfactual history). Again, fiction is not a prerequisite for counterfactual history (e.g. Scheidel 2017: 395–401), and some historians argue strongly against it (e.g. Ferguson 1998: 7). Yet it can offer an explicit and even formal method to underpin this fundamentally imaginative enterprise.

In summary, three key points emerge. First, fictive techniques are used by archaeologists with a variety of stated purposes. Second, these techniques are neither essential in the achievement of most of these stated objectives nor mutually exclusive of the use of other approaches. Third, many of these applications appear to make explicit types of thinking that commonly take place as archaeologists build interpretations and write narratives; thinking in terms of fiction engenders greater reflexivity about the research process as a whole.

Objections and challenges

Having demonstrated the long history of fictive techniques in archaeology and the motivations with which they are used, this section examines some of the objections and challenges involved. As already discussed above in relation to *Salammbô*, in mixing fiction and nonfiction, there is potentially a significant risk of confusion both within and beyond the discipline. The reflections of Sarah Pollock (2015: 284), a professor of nonfiction writing, on the contributions in the Van Dyke and Bernbeck (2015) volume are relevant:

Non-fiction writers imagine. Fiction writers invent. These are fundamentally different acts, performed to different ends [...] As scientists experimenting with new narrative forms, [archaeologists] would be wise to maintain an awareness of risk and a commitment to disclosure.

Core to Pollock's concern is the issue of outreach and the risk that the public mistakes our use of fiction for 'science'. In the context of the

current volume, and its central focus on the use of fictive techniques for archaeological research rather than outreach, this issue can be sidestepped to some degree. More importantly, however, in arguing that one of the benefits of using fictive techniques is that this makes explicit what are often implicit modes of thinking, Pollock's broader concern should not present difficulty.

Another objection is that the use of fictive techniques is simply not required to achieve the stated objectives; the same outcomes can be attained via other methods. Gibb's (2000: 2–3, 2003) argument that the writing of theatrical vignettes helped suggest new research questions, and that the method can form part of the analytical process has been critiqued on the basis that these questions should have been identified "well before the storytelling stage" (McKee & Galle 2000: 15). While it is probably true that these questions could have been developed without the use of fiction, Gibb's point is precisely, as noted above, that his method provides a means to show explicitly how his research questions were generated. As a form of structured imagination (see also Gibb, this volume), this approach offers a transparent and rigorous account of the handling of evidence and the generation of ideas, allowing others to follow the logic and potentially to go back and rework them.

A different question concerns the nature of archaeological 'facts'. In researching her novels on prehistoric Scotland, author Margaret Elphinstone (this volume) notes that she found data-rich site reports more useful and inspirational than interpretative volumes. Given the sustained critique of the traditional site report within the discipline (Mickel 2012a, 2012b), this is a striking observation. Are archaeologists' own efforts to create narrative generally, and fictive accounts specifically, less inspiring than the dry facts: context descriptions and lists of finds? True, highly successful novels can be built around individual objects from archaeological sites, such as Rosemary Sutcliff's (1954) *The Eagle of the Ninth*, inspired by a cast bronze eagle discovered at the Roman town of Silchester. Be that as it may, core to the critique of the archaeological site report is the presentation of 'data', detached from and independent of the archaeological processes that created them. But data invoked as facts are interpretative constructs (Chapman & Wylie 2016: 93). Novelists therefore do not take archaeological facts but archaeological interpretations (see chapters by Henson and Wickham-Jones, this volume). In the process, contingent ways of thinking can become embedded in historical novels. This can be problematic both because

the audiences for these works are much larger than those for scholarly texts and because, unlike those scholarly texts, novels are not updated; over time, they can therefore become “doubly historical” (Schwebel 2016: 21). But, as with Pollock’s concerns about potentially confusing the public (above), here, this particular issue can be partially sidestepped, for this volume is concerned with the integration of fictive techniques into the research process and the creation, rather than independent use, of those ‘interpretative facts’.

Different again is the question of if and how it is possible to hold fictional or imagined reconstructions to account. Are plausibility and multivocality sufficient to justify a disregard for equifinality? Are these accounts testable in the same way as scientific theories? If not, how is it possible to distinguish them from tall tales, or even from those narratives that attempt to deny events or to justify immoral actions and beliefs (Trigger 2006: 471–75)? There are different ways—none perfect—to respond to these concerns, but of central importance is archaeology’s core emphasis on materiality. Material culture does not have any singular meaning, but nor can it sustain an infinite number of meanings. Its material form and physical context limit the interpretative possibilities. We cannot say simply anything we like about the past; accounts must be logical and credible within the limits of the available evidence. Some, though not necessarily all, can be treated as models, as testable and falsifiable. In broader terms, the question of whether it is possible to hold interpretations to account is not limited to fiction and has been directed at a far wider range of archaeological research (e.g. *ibid.*, 470).

The universalising tendencies of fiction present another question. One argument in support of the time-traveller device discussed above is that, in order to understand ourselves, we need a sense of otherness and that, in a globalised present, the only place to experience such otherness is the past (cf. De Groot 2006). Yet most imaginative reconstructions—and phenomenological accounts—are predicated on the universalist assumption that past people experienced the world in similar physical, cognitive and emotional ways to ourselves. Indeed, it is precisely this assumption that permits us to connect with past people. Hence, rather than finding otherness in the past, we simply find ourselves. This arguably essentialist view of humanity contrasts with much sociological research built on constructivism, that is, the argument that minds and bodies are socialised and cultured in significantly different ways across time and space. This questions the assumption that, for example, the experiences of an archaeologist

moving through the landscape today might correspond with those of people in the past (see Brück 2005). The basic tenet of constructivism is particularly challenging for those interested in the use of fictive techniques, because making the past familiar through recognisable people and scenarios is one of the key motivations and methods invoked (see Elphinstone, this volume). When it is suggested that we can give a ‘voice’ to the people of the past, how can we be sure that we are not simply imposing our own voices, concerns and emotions (for a review of these issues in relation to slavery, see Gill et al. 2019)?

The osteobiographical approach discussed above raises specific ethical questions. Whereas scholars such as Tringham (1991) and Favro (1996) invent fictional characters to explore issues of gender and personal memory, it is, in the words of Joyce et al. (2002: 125), “more problematic to impute motivations, feelings, and thoughts to someone who actually lived, and who cannot speak for themselves”. In a similar vein, John Robb (2009: 112) presents a critical study of how archaeological research on Ötzi, the Ice Man, “has been harnessed to supplying personalizing narratives of his life and death”, which seek to normalise and familiarise that prehistoric body.

Within postcolonial studies, Gayatri Spivak (1988) has argued that attempts to give voice to the ‘Other’ always end up imposing the voice of the author. Archaeologist Reinhard Bernbeck (2015: 261) distils the core paradox: “The author who aims to include flesh-and-blood people in an archaeological narrative is forced to fictionalize the past [but] the invention of fictionalized subjects, however well meant the empathetic effort, implies a certain disrespect for past people”. The issue is made most apparent as we move into the archaeology of the recent past—slavery, the Irish Famine, the World Wars or the Holocaust (e.g. Gilead 2015). Bernbeck argues that rather than invoking empathy and forging connections with the people of the past, we should write fictional accounts that unsettle, disturb and alienate the reader (Bernbeck 2015: 267–69). In some respects, this is the logical conclusion of archaeology’s decolonisation process, and good archaeology should challenge, not just confirm, understandings of the past. But it is also problematic in practical and political terms.

First, by removing narrative and emotional connections with the past, and focusing on objects rather than people, the resulting accounts risk omitting the very characteristics that encourage people in the present, including archaeologists, to engage with the past. Moreover, even if these aspects were removed from the written

accounts, might they still underpin the archaeological thinking? That is, would this represent a change of written form but not the underlying cognitive engagement with the past? Second, Bernbeck sees the encroachment of the present on the past as a form of colonial violence. But over the past 30 years, historians and archaeologists have chosen to focus precisely—and with political purpose—on the ‘people without history’ (cf. Hobden, this volume). On the basis that those without history are powerless, if archaeologists shift their focus to objects, is there a risk that people, and especially those groups already hard to find in the archaeological record, slip from sight?

By granting full control of the past to the people of the past, Bernbeck’s position is diametrically opposed to that of scholars such as Holtorf (2007) who see the discipline’s ethical responsibilities as lying entirely in the present. A more pragmatic position would seem to recognise that archaeologists have responsibilities to both the past and present (and to the future); neither constituency has complete sovereignty over the other and every position we take is ultimately political. In this way, historians and archaeologists can acknowledge the intertextuality of the evidence and speak, however inarticulately, for the people of the past, while directing that work towards the pressing social issues of the present. More straightforwardly, Sarah Nelson (2015b: 217) argues that fiction is no more likely to objectify the people of the past than any other form of archaeological writing. Certainly there are risks (e.g. Schwebel 2016: 25 notes the danger of literary tropes), but there is also a need to recognise that the people of the past were more than dull-but-worthy caricatures (Edmonds 1999: x; Fleming 2006: 276).

In summary, the use of fictive techniques in archaeology is full of opportunity as well as danger. It raises significant epistemological and ethical questions, but also offers powerful ways of thinking and communicating about the past. It is clear that many see significant risk, if not outright error, in writing imaginatively about the past. Yet, as the diversity of examples cited here suggests, a wide range of archaeologists are already using fictive techniques in their research, while many more, we contend, are doing so, even if they do so subconsciously. Finally, many of the risks and objections identified apply equally to a wider range of archaeological thinking and writing and, as such, they cannot be targeted specifically against the use of fictive techniques any more than they can against ‘conventional’ archaeologies. In his analysis of archaeological storytelling, Terrell (1990) argues that scholarly accounts draw on deep narrative

structures to communicate. Such storytelling is not a neutral technology for ordering information, but rather it profoundly shapes the meaning of the material. He believes this to be a creative process, capable of stimulating new ideas and hypotheses, and even of being testable. But he also argues for critical self-reflection to avoid prejudicing our understanding. Storytelling, for example, involves deep-rooted components such as actors and formal structure that shape meaning through implied causation. Much more recently, similar arguments have been made by Gerbault et al. (2014) in relation to the archaeological narratives, or stories, told about domestication. The key point here is that these are seen as dangers of conventional archaeological narratives. Terrell is not critiquing the use of fiction—he is talking about archaeology, as a science, being fundamentally a form of storytelling. A distinction between conventional archaeological narratives and imagined narratives can, and should, be maintained, but they are not divided by a single or sharply demarcated line that separates fact from fiction. Not least, as the contributors to this volume demonstrate, historical fiction and the use of fictive techniques in archaeology both rely on a combination of rigorous research, deep and critical engagement with the evidence and the act of imagination.

In the words of Adrian Praetzelis (2015: 122), this type of archaeology is “as much about the archaeologist awakening his or her own creativity as it is about communicating the result to an audience. Sometimes more so”. Some might fear that the sleep of reason will produce monsters, but the full epigraph of Francisco Goya’s *Capricho* 43 neatly sums up our position: “Fantasy abandoned by reason produces impossible monsters: united with her [reason], she [fantasy] is the mother of the arts and the origin of their marvels” (see [Figure 1.1](#); Sokolove 2009: 39).

This volume

With these many issues and questions in mind, this volume gathers together a diverse group of contributors. The authors were invited to bring their individual experiences and expertise to the discussion, and the result is a variety of perspectives. We have, however, sought to ensure that the volume is more than the sum of its parts by, for example, the circulation of draft chapters between the contributors to encourage the cross-fertilisation of ideas.

The first group of papers focus on prehistory and historical novels.

Archaeologist Caroline Wickham-Jones presents a wide-ranging discussion of the intersection between archaeological interpretation and fiction writing based on her experience as an archaeologist and her work with novelists. The core of the chapter is her analysis of the role of archaeological ‘facts’ in fiction writing. Reflecting on the epistemological shakiness of much archaeological evidence and the scholarly interpretations of it, she turns the tables to suggest: “perhaps it is not so much the role of fact in popular writing that we need to worry about as the definition of fact in academic texts”. Next, historical novelist Margaret Elphinstone reflects on the ‘voices from the silence’ and the process of working with archaeological materials and archaeologists (including Wickham-Jones). Her chapter examines the medium of fiction writing and the materials and experiences that the novelist can draw upon. In particular, she relates the ways in which she has developed awareness of her own cultural context and its limitations, for example, in relation to oral storytelling, and her discovery of words to describe the past through her attempts to craft objects and to forage for food. Writing about the Mesolithic, Elphinstone argues that there is only a limited number of stories to be told—they are simply told in different forms. Certainly recent comparative phylogenetic analyses of folktales demonstrates the long-term stability of simple narrative forms over centuries, with at least one story reaching back to the Bronze Age (Graça da Silva & Tehrani 2016). Though some way short of the Mesolithic, this supports Elphinstone’s broader point about the persistence of narrative forms.

Mark Patton is an archaeologist who latterly has moved into novel writing. His chapter provides detailed examples of how, in writing two of his novels, he was able to draw on archaeological excavations he conducted some years earlier. From his unique vantage point, he is able to define both the differences and the shared aims of the two enterprises. One of his key observations is of historical fiction as form of thought experiment through which to access the less tangible and more remote aspects of the past. Next, archaeologist Donald Henson presents his analysis of imagined accounts of the British Mesolithic. By quantifying the different characters, settings and actions represented in historical novels set in Mesolithic Britain—a surprising number!—Henson demonstrates significant biases, for example, in the representation of men and women or in the emphasis on certain activities. At the same time, he argues, some of these novels provide important lessons for archaeologists, articulating more diverse and fully rounded accounts of the Mesolithic than found in scholarly

accounts. Mesolithic people lived very different lives from us, but as Henson demonstrates, one reason for the fascination with this period lies in the lessons that it offers for our own world. The [next chapter](#), by Daniël van Helden and Robert Witcher, focuses on the concept of empathy, which they argue underlies the success of much historical fiction, but is also integral to the archaeological process. By concentrating on the work of R.G. Collingwood and Hans-Georg Gadamer, they examine how novelists and archaeologists seek to put the reader in the shoes of past people with the aim of understanding their emotions and actions. Such empathy (rather than sympathy) is a potentially powerful tool for archaeologists, but also raises epistemological and ethical issues that require substantially more research.

The next group of chapters comprises contributions that each addresses a different, specific form or application of fictive techniques. First, archaeologists Francesco Ripanti and Giulia Osti present two case studies of public archaeology projects on active excavations in Italy. The authors reflect on the particular challenges and opportunities of excavating sites and simultaneously interpreting them for the public. In each case, the archaeologists sought to integrate fictive techniques into their interactions with local communities, including a writing competition and the production of docudramas. The results of these exercises—unexpected insights and ideas—fed back into the ongoing archaeological research processes. A particular fictive technique, discussed above, is playwriting, and one of the pioneers of this approach, archaeologist James Gibb, offers further thoughts on the use of dialogue to advance archaeological understanding of the past. A key innovation here is his application of the method, hitherto focused on more recent historical periods, back into prehistoric times. Working in the United States, Gibb's extension of the technique into the precolonial past raises a different set of ethical questions compared to the work of, for example, Elphinstone and Patton in Europe. Firmly believing in the need for archaeology to occupy the territory between the humanities and the sciences, Gibb also emphasises the requirement for the rigorous engagement with the evidence and the potential for the more formal testing of ideas.

The [next chapter](#), by archaeologist Michael Given, is a translation into text of a storytelling performance at one of the conference sessions from which this volume derives. Without exaggeration, the audience at that meeting was spellbound. Here Given retells the story—refusing to confirm or deny its veracity—about his subterranean

meeting with a mineworker during fieldwork on Cyprus. Like Gibb, he finds that creating dialogue compels him to engage more closely with people and, like Ripanti and Osti, he relates how performing such stories can lead to the co-production of knowledge as an integral part of the research process. Next, archaeologist and poet Erin Kavanagh makes the case for poetry as a research method using examples from her personal practice. These include the use of poetic language to communicate between different stakeholders and the writing of an epic poem (included as an appendix) that draws together archaeological and geological data, with literary references, to conjure a voice from the past. In both cases, she argues, the poetic form can be as precise and analytical as any scientific language, and, indeed, can serve as both method and result.

The final chapter in this group reports the collaboration between two archaeologists, one of whom is also a visual artist and the other a novelist. After setting out their theoretical position, Victoria Thompson explains how she went about writing a short story (included as an appendix) inspired by two pieces of Anglo-Saxon stonework. Giacomo Savani then details the processes by which he produced a series of paintings to illustrate the text and the complex ways in which the words and images work in tandem, or at cross purposes, to communicate the story. Much has been written about visual archaeological reconstructions (e.g. Perry & Johnson 2014; Hughes 2015; Sorrell & Sorrell 2018), but little research has explored the incorporation of these images into textual narrative and how they can be integrated into the research process.

The next set of chapters offers some external perspective on the use of fictive techniques in archaeology. Historian Fiona Hobden takes the TV series *Spartacus* as a case study for the power of fictional representations of the past. Her analysis shows how the series builds both on archaeological evidence and layers of historical interpretation to evoke a vivid, if not always authentic, Roman past. The effectiveness of the depiction of characters lies not in the accuracy of the costume or scenery, but in the use of techniques such as empathy and plot to create credible scenarios that communicate the complexity of life in the Roman world. Joanna Paul also looks to the Roman world and to the subdiscipline of Classical Reception Studies. Her chapter examines the way in which classicists have developed a vibrant area of research around the uses and representations of the classical past in later societies. Paralleling the wider argument of this volume, Paul demonstrates how the study of these later (fictional)

representations not only gives insight into the contexts in which they were created but also into the original source materials and periods. The analysis of a retelling of the *Odyssey*, for example, can form part of a re-analysis of the original story, in the same way that creating imagined scenes or dialogue based on archaeological materials can lead back to a reassessment of the original material evidence. Finally, Andrew Elliott brings insight from the discipline of Film and Cultural Studies. The representation of the past in film has generated a huge literature (e.g. Wyke 1997; Michelakis & Wyke 2013). Much of the debate around this has focused on questions of the accuracy of portrayals and the impact on audiences, particularly in an educational sense. Starting from the position that such films are intended to entertain rather than educate, Elliott asks, why care about accuracy? In answering that question, he also makes clear how little we really understand about the way in which the message (historically accurate or otherwise) is transmitted to and decoded by the audience. These are questions which resonate across the volume: What constitutes accuracy and how does it relate to authenticity and truth? How do archaeologists communicate with their audiences, professional and public? Where and how is the past actually made? Collectively, the three chapters in this group underscore the great potential for more interdisciplinary research into the use of fictive techniques in archaeology.

The volume concludes with a chapter by archaeologist Adrian Praetzelis, a long-term advocate and practitioner of ‘transgressive archaeology’. Here, he reflects on the motivations for some of his own work, undertaken with Mary Praetzelis. He also draws out some of the common themes linking the other contributions in this volume, including narrative as method, empathy and artistic expression. Like the editors, he is pleasantly surprised by the degree to which the diversity of authors and approaches succeeds in offering complementary and overlapping insights into the use of fictive techniques in archaeology. Our collective hope is that these contributions lead to further work on the many stimulating new questions they raise.

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2The cornflakes of prehistory

Fact, fiction and imagination in archaeology

Caroline Wickham-Jones

Introduction

As an archaeologist, it is my job to report information about the past and interpret it for people in the present. But I am also an avid reader—books open up new worlds and new experiences for me. I use novels to gain this experience as much as textbooks. Increasingly, I find that the two are intertwined. The thrust of the present volume is a consideration of the role of fiction within academic archaeology. This chapter takes it as given that fiction has a valuable role to play, and not just as a tool of communication. For me, the experience of working in fiction (albeit as facilitator rather than actually writing it) has been invaluable. It has changed the way I work and think as a professional, helping me identify gaps in my archaeology, examine relationships between different strands of evidence, and reminding me that the end product of my work should always focus on people—the lives of past communities. Aspects of this experience have already been published elsewhere (Elphinstone & Wickham-Jones 2012) and will be referred to below. Yet, the creation of fiction is still not a mainstream archaeological tool. Many would argue that it involves the application of imagination and, as such, is academically suspect. In this chapter, I focus on the boundaries within which that imagination should operate in the hope that by opening up a discourse it might be possible to validate the role of fiction and imagination within archaeology.

There is, of course, another use of fiction within archaeology, that is, the long and well-established history of using narrative and fictional techniques for the wider communication of archaeology (see Ruddick 2009). One might, therefore, argue that archaeological fiction has become a significant means of education. It goes further, though. The increasing popularity of docudramas and historical reconstructions in a variety of media means that many people will receive most of their archaeological and historical information

through the consumption of fiction on television or in other mainstream media (see Elliott, this volume). For this to produce the desired results from an archaeological perspective, it is necessary for the archaeologist and the writer of fiction to collaborate. In some cases, they may be one and the same person, though, in others, they may not only be different individuals but also have differing aims. Whether the narrative has been created with the aim of education or not, it will, inevitably, influence the reader (Vickers 2017) and there are, thus, questions to be asked about the reliability (and extent) of the sources upon which the novelist has drawn. The use of fiction (by which I mean the use of the imagination) therefore comes with responsibilities and ethical concerns. This chapter explores the boundaries between fiction and fact (by which I mean the presentation of provable truths) in archaeological writing, building on my experiences as an archaeologist with an interest in public interpretation and as an archaeological mentor to many aspiring and established novelists.

Despite fiction's popularity, its use as an educational tool remains controversial. For every aficionado who advocates the reading of a particular novel to help understand a period, there are others who will raise a sceptical eyebrow at the veracity of the contents. To a certain extent, this judgement remains a personal matter; but, while it is relatively easy to evaluate the work of outsiders (non-archaeologists), what about those within the profession who choose to make use of the technique? Several archaeologists have added fictional narrative to nonfictional discourse (e.g. Kamp 1998; Edmonds 1999; Mithen 2003), while others have produced full-length novels. There are also accounts of PhDs and other academic research that have been turned into novels (e.g. Marshall Thomas 1988; Kurtén 1995). Aside from the fun of creating the world of the past, does this sort of enterprise bring anything of value to the writers other than a different style of writing and communication? As noted elsewhere (Elphinstone & Wickham-Jones 2012), I would argue that it is a useful exercise, allowing one to add colour to monochromatic archaeological data, to try out different scenarios, to think about the people, to look at how possible interpretations might work in practice and in relation to one another, and to spot (and ponder) gaps in one's own understanding (see also Gibb, this volume). In my experience, working with a professional novelist became a valuable academic exercise.

Faction: the role of accuracy in novel writing

If fiction is to become an academic tool, it is important that it operates within accepted academic boundaries. Recently, the role of accuracy within the archaeological novel has become acutely relevant to me as a professional archaeologist. This has been sparked partly by my debate with a fiction author who did not like the ‘factual’ information I supplied and chose instead to use their individual (conflicting) interpretation. This provoked opposing opinions within me: on the one hand, I felt that it was fiction and thus could replace the evidence with an imagined alternative; on the other hand, I felt that it could be seen as an attempt to subvert the truth. Does this matter? Should accuracy be an important part of archaeological fiction? I was surprised by my own negative reaction and I began to explore the issues. After all, I am happy to read about imaginary places, people or lifestyles in the present or future: why, then, do I object to them in the past?

Two novelists, each writing about the same site and in novels published in the same year, discuss how they approached their interpretation, perfectly illustrating my dilemma.

I have researched and visited museums and sites and taken photographs and talked and listened, but if you are looking in the result for a historical document, you will be disappointed.

(Lennon 2015: 235)

I always tend to look at evidence with an alternative view and my experiments in ancient pottery, cooking and material culture have given me skills and knowledge of the past. I enjoy putting flesh on ancient bones, brains in their skulls, hunger and satisfaction in their bodies and, of course, love and lust in their hearts. I feel that many archaeologists tend to de-personalise the lives of people from the past.

(Appleby 2015: xii).

While one of these authors emphasises the subjective nature of interpretation, the other seeks to validate their own creativity. It is ironic, to me, that the most ‘authentic’ portrayal of the past is the most understated (Lennon 2015), while the other, though commendably seeking to bring the past alive, has made use of a more imaginative stance (Appleby 2015).

Do facts exist in archaeology?

If we are to promote the benefits of fiction within academia, then is it not important that it be based on incontrovertible fact? Before considering the significance of archaeological facts in novel writing, it is necessary to be sure what we mean by 'archaeological fact'. As archaeologists, we base our own interpretations on facts, drawn from excavations or laboratory analyses. These facts comprise incontrovertible truths: the presence of a piece of flaked stone; the existence of a spread of charcoal; the location of a cut feature. The interpretation of those facts is, however, subjective: a scraper, a hearth, a pit. In order to construct these interpretations, we draw on two things: our own learned cultural experience from practising as archaeologists over the years, and information we have gathered from broadening that cultural experience, perhaps by reading ethnographic literature, conducting experiments or learning from other people's archaeological work. In order to assess these interpretations, we need to understand the foundations on which we have built them. We need to examine the nature, and origins, of our knowledge. This is important because it helps us assess the strengths and limitations of our own work and it helps us consider our work in relation to that of others.

Thus, despite the existence of incontrovertible truths, it is not possible to argue that archaeological narrative is objective. We can see the data, we can handle and measure them, but the meaning that we ascribe to them is subjective. One person's watch fire may be another person's cooking spot. Each consumer of narrative must assess its accuracy, whether using their own pre-existing knowledge or by the reading of a dust jacket and book reviews. In a broad sense, therefore, all archaeological interpretation is fiction, whether produced by a specialist or not, and whether published in a scholarly site report or a novel. You only have to consider the way in which understanding of a site changes as excavation proceeds, or to look at developments in the interpretation of artefacts over the past few decades, in order to see the fluidity of archaeological 'knowledge'.

Understanding the facts

It is important not to confuse the archaeological interpretations we create with those hard facts with which we start. For from interpretations, we move on to build our narrative. This was summed

up by Colin Richards reflecting on his publication of the excavation report for the site at Barnhouse in Orkney:

Hence, we can argue about the interpretation of a site, but cannot question the “data”, because by definition it is something which is given.

(Richards 2005: 3)

This may be both true and generally acknowledged, but all too often interpretations presented as ‘possible’ in the discussion section, become definitive by the conclusions of a volume. This is an issue not just for the written word. It may be explicit with a text, but it can also be implicit in the meaning, with the result that the reader (or audience in the case of a lecture or broadcast) is nudged from the qualified acceptance of a theory into belief in an idea. Although sometimes this is deliberate, more often it is not. We all have personal theories and we need to believe in them in order to sound enthusiastic and convincing—it is part of the subconscious training of the communicator. Nevertheless, it is important to be careful: through this process, one person’s qualified opinion can be picked up by others and turned into unqualified certainty. Archaeological fiction all too easily becomes archaeological fact, even within the bounds of academia.

Speculation or inference?

So, how many facts are enough? There is an increasing concern with the provision of quantitative analysis to support our interpretations and to facilitate their replicability. This might be considered to improve the accuracy of an interpretation, but it is not quite that simple. For example, we might speculate that burials with elaborate grave goods alongside those without might indicate social hierarchy, but does an analysis of the material from the graves support the distinction? Are there alternative explanations? Despite the development of analytical techniques and their deployment in other disciplines, archaeology rarely delves into the sort of statistical analysis that might demonstrate a significant difference, and thus support a theory based on inference (see MacInnes 2018). There is a serious difference between speculation (“the forming of a theory without firm evidence”, *OED*) and inference (“a conclusion reached on the basis of evidence and reasoning”, *OED*), though archaeologists tend to blur the two. All too often we prefer the former to the latter.

In order to lift speculation into the realm of inference, it is necessary to add a level of data analysis that is rarely undertaken (see Wickham-Jones et al. 2016, 2018). And, even though quantification may help identify statistical difference in our hypothetical datasets, it rarely provides incontrovertible proof that a particular example has resulted from a specific action or belief system. Of course, in the absence of agreed disciplinary standards, the amount of analysis necessary to turn speculation into inference is a personal decision, but too many archaeological interpretations continue to rely on poorly controlled and narrow research. One might note here the possibility of using fiction to present different scenarios, with the caveat that it is still likely that a reader may be nudged into accepting one particular scenario.

It might be argued that the presence of uncertainty is a necessary limitation given the extent of variability in the human condition around the globe and throughout history. There are, for example, many different types of social inequality and many different ways in which these may be manifest in the archaeological record. Perhaps we should just accept that our overall understandings will always be limited and narrow. In this case, it is possible to argue that the (non-specialist) writer of modern fiction is performing a useful archaeological service by extending the range from which narrative may be drawn. Interpretation is always tempered by the cultural and academic contexts of the researcher. Studies of some material are, therefore, likely to result in different explanations, or interpretations, of the archaeological record, depending on the interests of the research team (Drennan et al. 2010). Nevertheless, the provision of quantifiable data is always a useful measure of real, rather than presumed, difference and thus a valuable tool to lift speculation into inference.

Of course, the same issues are relevant in the construction of fiction, but more difficult to assess given the range of place, period and scenario. There are, however, a few sites that have attracted the attention of authors over time, and these provide a handy gauge of the changes within popular narrative even when drawn from a single (if growing) data source. One such location is Skara Brae, a Neolithic village in Orkney (Childe 1931; Clarke & Maguire 1989; Shepherd 2016). Over the decades, Skara Brae has inspired a number of novels about life in Neolithic Orkney ([Table 2.1](#)). Reading through the novels is an interesting exercise, illustrating the development of the archaeological narrative from which individual authors have drawn

their inspiration. It is possible, for example, to see considerable development in environmental awareness and information, from the early assumption that the landscape of the past was much like that of today to more recent concerns with climatic and environmental change and the interplay between the inhabitants of the site and the changing world in which they lived (see also Henson, this volume). While some have chosen to take very modern family structures and concerns and situate them in the past, others have tried to avoid this and to produce an imaginative rendering of a world that is both different and believable. Some stick closely to conventional archaeological ‘wisdom’, others place more emphasis on the invention of alternative scenarios. No doubt there will be future novels that will add further colour to the interpretative cloak.

Table 2.1 Novels set around the Scottish Neolithic village of Skara Brae

Publisher	
1991	Simon & Schuster
1992	Simon & Schuster
1993	Simon & Schuster
1994	Simon & Schuster
1995	Simon & Schuster
1996	Simon & Schuster
1997	Simon & Schuster
1998	Simon & Schuster
1999	Simon & Schuster
2000	Simon & Schuster
2001	Simon & Schuster
2002	Simon & Schuster
2003	Simon & Schuster
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2013	Simon & Schuster
2014	Simon & Schuster
2015	Simon & Schuster
2016	Simon & Schuster
2017	Simon & Schuster
2018	Simon & Schuster
2019	Simon & Schuster
2020	Simon & Schuster
2021	Simon & Schuster
2022	Simon & Schuster
2023	Simon & Schuster
2024	Simon & Schuster
2025	Simon & Schuster

Does lack of proof matter?

Does the lack of incontrovertible proof for our archaeological interpretations matter? Richards thought not, as long as we acknowledged it. I am inclined to agree with him, with the caveat that we *must* acknowledge it, and all too often we do not. Archaeological interpretation today is still a probability statement, not a fact. This impacts on both our academic writing and our more popular work. Richards (2005) went on to alter the conventional structure of the archaeological monograph so that the Barnhouse report would reflect this hierarchy of information: he presented his subjective interpretation first and then used subsequent chapters to explore the evidence that he felt would back it up. This is an interesting and perhaps more honest way to present the results of an excavation. For me this layout does not change the way in which I use the volume, and the information that I derive from it, but it is certainly a significant change of emphasis. By bringing the interpretation to the

front and emphasising that it is interpretation, Richards reminds us of the subjective nature of his archaeological opinion while subsequently providing us with the tools to make our own judgements about his conclusions. Given the more reflective nature of archaeology today, it is surprising that his example has not been followed by others. This could be an indication of the conservative nature of the traditional archaeologist. One might also note digital publishing has encouraged the separate publication of interpretation and the supporting specialist analyses and data catalogues, often as grey literature. Nevertheless, the lazy acceptance of 'interpretation' as 'fact' (and presentation of specialist research that apparently builds to a set conclusion) has led to many archaeological misunderstandings. Whether created by the professional archaeologist or the novelist, our interpretations of the past matter. They should be rooted in the data.

Good stories and the importance of critique

The way in which we tend to forget our powers of critique and confuse interpretations with facts when we come to construct wider archaeological narratives is problematic. It is important to question our interpretations at every stage. We need to recognise interpretation for what it is: a good story. This story will fit the 'facts' as we know them at the time, and sometimes we can combine stories to create narrative. But any particular 'time-frame' is merely a brief window. New archaeological techniques are being developed constantly, and their application allows new possibilities and refinements to enter our stories. Who 30 years ago would have thought that we could unpick the details of diet from isotope analysis of skeletal material? Or identify the DNA of animals from sediment samples? We should always be re-examining the data, seeking new data and, from this, developing new interpretations or at the very least refining the old. In too many cases, however, we use previous interpretations as the 'facts' on which we build our new imaginings. This is a shaky and flawed foundation. The academic tendency to avoid rereading older publications is noted below. Perhaps if we were to return to the original literature we might find that examination of the fundamental basics has something to offer in this respect. Just because a publication is old, does not mean that all of the information therein is not useful.

Richards was right: all excavation reports are subjective. But my problems go deeper than this. When I worked with Margaret

Elphinstone to help out with an authentic Mesolithic background for her novel *The Gathering Night* (2010), I realised that there were massive gaps in my own understanding. As an archaeologist, I had only ever had to write up the evidence that I found. I used this to construct my understanding of Mesolithic human lives in the early Holocene. Margaret came to me because I was, supposedly, an expert. But there were so many of her questions that I could not answer. ‘What did Mesolithic people eat for breakfast?’ ‘How important was privacy?’ ‘What did they do with their dead?’ I found that my expertise was limited. Her questions touched on aspects of life, and death, for which I had not encountered archaeological material. It came to me that I really knew very little about the Mesolithic. Yet, here I was, constructing knowledge: knowledge that might be incorporated into textbooks, knowledge about people’s lives (see also Elphinstone, this volume).

I did not lose the desire to build a picture of the lives of the Mesolithic inhabitants of Scotland. But I did start to change the way I thought about it, and about the building blocks that I might need to construct it. In this way, fiction became an important part of my archaeological education. It enriched the way I thought and made me question many of my previous assumptions.

If we recognise that archaeological ‘fact’ is rarely objective and immutable, and if we become less precious about the significance of those facts for our interpretations, then we open the way to the introduction of new sources of information. We open the way to wider interpretations. Archaeology in the twenty-first century is less protective of its status as knowledge giver, and it is not uncommon to see material from a wide range of sources included in any interpretation. This might include ‘minority’ voices, different age groups, those with different skill sets or even those who live in comparable locations or practice related rituals. Chippindale (1990), for example, has explored some of the varied opinions relating to Stonehenge, while a recent map has presented the Heart of Neolithic Orkney World Heritage Site as seen through the eyes of local children (HES 2016).

Interpretations that recognise such diversity are, in my opinion, interpretations that are better informed. But, they still have to be considered with an acknowledgement of the limitations of the archaeological facts and the wholly subjective nature of interpretation, together with the acknowledgement that we should constantly question and refine the interpretative narratives that we

create. Years ago, I was asked to update my book *Scotland's first settlers* (Wickham-Jones 1994) and I refused, saying that were I to write it today, I would write a very different book. I still hold to that. We should not merely be updating the stories we tell; we should be rewriting them. In that way, we can introduce new material, and not just archaeological material, but also new source types, views and opinions. If we accept the transient nature of the interpretation of archaeological fact, we can, for example, introduce the evidence from other people's stories—here I am thinking particularly of oral history and traditional tales (e.g. Kamp 1998; see Elphinstone, this volume). This is a complex field, but these are stories that have already been shown, in some exciting examples (e.g. Shaw et al. 2010; Lacroix et al. 2014), to contain more than a grain of archaeological significance.

The limitations of the imagination

There is another consideration here, and this lies in the way in which we make use of data to build stories. Earlier, I noted that novels are important for me because they present new worlds and experiences. Yet, of course, those worlds and experiences have to come from somewhere and they are, always, rooted within someone else's imagination and the data they had to hand. There is an increasing body of literature that discusses the way in which our interpretation of past societies (whether in fiction or academic writings) will always be based within our contemporary cultural experiences, no matter how far we try to create new boundaries and new worlds. Tarlow (2000, 2012) emphasises the subconscious power of the 'universal past' across popular media, and it is worth noting what a seductive pull this is. I may feel that I am entering a 'new world' when I read a satisfying novel, but it is always going to be someone else's world, and the chances are that the principal features and feelings will resonate with my own background, or unconscious desires. I had a stark experience of this when reading *Sugar Money*, by Jane Harris (2017). It is a novel which, while set in the not-too-distant past, explored a world that I found totally alien and quite upsetting, a novel that made me question the foundations of my own existence and lifestyle. It was a book that I found hard and upsetting to read, and yet one which has stayed with me. The unfamiliar nature (for me) of the world depicted, and my own reaction to it, served to highlight how generally I seek out in my own reading reassuring or familiar settings.

These points are significant, but not, to my mind, problematic.

Despite the body of literature, the teaching of exploratory modules and serious reflective self-critique, we can never overcome the boundaries of our collective existence. You have only to look at the aliens in popular media to see how most are rooted within our own understandings of life forms rather than exploring the possibilities of other chemical and/or physical compositions. As Mary Beard (2017) demonstrates, we are all horribly bound by an intricate web of bias that is not necessarily of our own making. There is a wealth of research on implicit bias, and some of it makes for uncomfortable reading (Harvard 2011; Banaji & Greenwald 2016). We cannot escape it, but we can make sure that we are always aware of the limitations it imposes. As Harris (2017) and others (Tarlow 2012) have shown, we can use the world experience of others to push the boundaries, and thus, it is still possible to provide individual experiences that are enlightening and different, even if they remain rooted (however obscurely) in contemporary culture. It is not necessary to break out completely of the ‘universal past’ in order to introduce people to new experiences and make them think afresh (see van Helden & Witcher, this volume).

It is also worth noting the contribution of past fiction. It would be arrogant to argue that recent writers alone contribute to the body of relevant literature, yet the contribution of earlier writers is often overlooked. In some cases, they were working in the very periods we now seek to elucidate. In all cases, they were subject to the biases of individuality and points of view that we can see in ourselves. But even readings of Alcott (2017 [1868]), Roberts (2012 [1930]) or Wilder (2012 [1932]), reveal ways of thinking and living that are very different to our own. How much more so when the fiction in question was composed millennia ago as with the *Odyssey* (eighth century bc) or the *Wanderer* (ninth or tenth century ad)?

The peopling of the past

There are other considerations related to the way in which fiction makes use of archaeological data to create the story of the past. The novelist Appleby (2015), for example, comments on the value of the ‘alternative view’. But is the alternative view really the better view? I am not even sure how we define an alternative view. In reality, there is no reason why the interpretations offered by the writers of fiction should be any more alternative than those of archaeologists. For something to be alternative, there has to be a norm. Yet even the

briefest examination of archaeological literature reveals a wealth of opinion that rarely concurs. We have stopped ascribing value to a view depending on those who promote it. Rather than alternative views, it is, surely, more appropriate to believe in a palette of varying approaches and interpretations, all based in archaeological possibility, from which we will each select those that make sense for us. In this way, the views of archaeologists and non-archaeologists may be combined into a more holistic outcome.

Appleby (2015: xii) also comments on the tendency of archaeologists to “depersonalise the lives of the people of the past”, which he feels has detracted from the interpretative narrative. This is a more important point. One might argue that, given the breadth of the discipline of archaeology, it is not the role of every archaeological specialist to add the personal to their output. Nevertheless, inasmuch as he is critiquing the discipline as a whole, it is worth examining the role of creating a personalised account of the past for the professional archaeologist. While we are, no doubt, custodians and narrators of the evidence of the human past, it is hard, once again, to be strictly prescriptive as to the ways in which we achieve our aim. Some see the lives of the past in terms of individuals and communities, others in terms of human behaviour. There is a difference between depersonalising and dehumanising, and, while the integration of the personal may be a worthwhile goal for many, it is the loss of humanity from our work that we should most fear. In this respect, and assuming that archaeological fiction will always have at its heart the creation of narrative about people, perhaps the most valuable role of fiction is the way in which it reminds us to move beyond the dusty relics and records of our excavations and field surveys. It reminds us to care about the people. Whether we aim for a personal account or not, it is the incorporation of humanity that is important. The integration of individual voices can then become one valuable contribution of fiction (whoever writes it).

New sources of information

It seems that (so-called) fiction might play a more significant role in archaeologists’ construction of narrative than we have previously recognised. It broadens our worldview, helps us identify gaps in our interpretations and reminds us to focus on people. I am a great fan of Ursula Le Guin’s (1989) “Carrier bag theory of fiction”, in which she examines the role of stories in shaping how we look at ourselves. It is

interesting that in the past we gave status to the storytellers, whose narratives informed us about the world in which we live. In recent centuries, this status has lessened. We have diminished the didactic power of fiction and increased the distance between fiction and fact. One need only consider the relative values ascribed to ‘academic’ and ‘popular’ outputs in the most recent Research Excellence Framework evaluation of UK universities (REF 2014). It is salutary to realise that academic and popular used to be one and the same.

I am an archaeologist because I am fascinated with other people’s lives. I want to construct stories about the people of the past. But one thing I quickly learnt when working with Margaret Elphinstone was that I did not have a glittering career as a novelist. I was better at providing the threads from which others could weave the narrative. This leads me to my second theme: the role of ‘fact’ in archaeological fiction; the responsibility to ensure that archaeological fiction adheres to the boundaries of understanding at the time it is written.

Constructing narrative: communication and content

First of all, I would emphasise that not everyone can be, or has to be, an accomplished novelist. In archaeology, we are used to the role of specialists. Why is it so hard then to accept that one of those specialisms is communication? Communication breaks down into its own sub-specialisms: the writer of the academic report, the radio interviewee, the novelist, the copywriter. All have an important role to play in archaeology, but they do not have to be the same person. It does not matter who does the individual tasks as long as they get done, and done well. Let us accept that fiction, and novelists, are an important part of the process of archaeological communication. What role does fact have to play in this, and how significant is it for archaeological narratives?

The important point is that, while the interpretations that archaeologists provide to the novelist may have fuzzy edges, it is then necessary for that novelist to write within acceptable boundaries. Vickers (2017: 7) notes that there is a difference between “the honest pursuit of the truth and the cynical pursuit of thoughtless—even vindictive—sensationalism”. His consideration referred to recent events involving living participants, but the same standards apply to older, archaeological, scenarios. Whether the construction of narrative involves imagination or invention, the parameters of the context need to be accurate. This, I think, is why I find it upsetting to read accounts

of Neolithic rabbit stews or external windows in Iron Age brochs. If we accept that the medium of books (and other media such as films and television) has a significant role to play in communicating archaeology, then it is important to make sure that the information on which it is based is reasonable. Examples such as the anachronisms above undermine my confidence in an author's research and make me question the rest of their text.

It is, however, up to the author to choose what they include. Some choose to ignore our advice. Does it matter? At times, we may flood them with irrelevant detail. I learnt early on that the interests of Mesolithic realism precluded detailed commentaries on the minutiae of flint knapping. How many of us would give a blow-by-blow account of putting the cornflakes into the bowl, adding the milk and then on to the table at breakfast time? Or of driving a car? For those of us familiar with twenty-first-century routines, these are obvious and unnecessary details. If we want to make our stories of the past believable, then we need to avoid superfluous recitals like these and find more subtle ways to communicate the information. This is one of the skills of the novelist. Some choose devices such as the introduction of a time-travelling narrator for whom everything is strange (e.g. Gabaldon 2015; Lennon 2015); others set the scene more subtly (Elphinstone 2010).

No matter how accurate, however, novels can only reflect the archaeological paradigm of the time they are written. Rereading Fidler (1968) reveals an outdated view of Neolithic society, written without the benefit of subsequent research. On the surface, this might detract from the value of the novel, much as older academic papers can be regarded as suspect. We rarely cast the latter aside without thinking, however, and, in many cases, they provide the necessary backdrop to our research (they certainly help us avoid reinventing the wheel). In the same way, earlier novels, while dated, can provide a useful insight into the development of archaeological narrative and might even be compared with more recent accounts as the basis for valuable discussion—surely a useful educational tool.

Constructing narrative: values

Fiction, when rooted within the right parameters, is indeed an integral part of archaeology. It is one that we should value no less than the writing of the grand report. We may not all be writing novels, but fiction is as much a part of archaeological collaboration as anything

else. Audiences for archaeological fiction are, after all, likely to exceed those for academic texts by a considerable margin.

I love working with novelists. They ask questions I cannot answer and force me to confront the gaps in my own knowledge and in the archaeological evidence. The journey I undertake with them is one of archaeological fact as much as it is one of archaeological fiction. Some people have questioned my devotion to the aspiring novelist, but if we do not take the time to work with them, then we certainly have no right to question their final output. The past is not ours to guard. If our academic texts are not immediately user-friendly, then we have a duty to help these people out.

Not all novelists share my feelings towards accuracy, it is true. And it is worth remembering that, while I see the output as a valuable educational tool, they may simply be making use of the past in order to provide a setting for a specific story or idea. This could be a hurdle given that there is, as yet, no grading of books to reflect the seriousness with which an author undertakes their research. Despite the efforts of authors such as Mantel (BBC 2017) and Gregory (2018), those who consume a fictional narrative have to take the question of ‘accuracy’ at face value. Vickers has published a scene-by-scene breakdown of the accuracy of the Netflix series *The Crown* (2017), but few depictions of the past receive such intimate attention to detail. We can take to heart Vickers’ (2017: 7) statement that “fiction should help us to understand the truth, not pervert it”, but for now the onus has to be on archaeologists (and historians) to promote the value of accuracy in the construction of a good story.

Notwithstanding this caveat, the use of narrative fiction has to be an expansion of our archaeological skills not a limitation. I have used novels in my teaching, and I have asked students to look at the evidence from the point of view of the novelist. Nevertheless, fiction is fiction; it is subjective whether it relates to the interpretation of a specific excavation site or to the activities of an imaginary Mesolithic family. I would like to quote from Le Guin, as she is concerned about the biases inherent in the construction of a good story, and she illustrates them very well indeed:

The mammoth hunters spectacularly occupy the cave wall and the mind, but what we actually did to stay alive and fat was gather seeds, roots, sprouts, shoots, leaves, nuts, berries, fruits, and grains, adding bugs and molluscs and netting or snaring birds, fish, rats, rabbits and other tuskless small fry to up the protein.

(Le Guin 1989: 165)

All stories are biased, not least because we tell them in order to make an impact. Le Guin's essay is charmingly simplistic, but her point that the mainstream activities of life are often too insignificant to register in any narrative account, is one that we would do well to remember. She is also concerned with the way in which the story can be hijacked by one element of society (in this case, the mammoth hunters) to the detriment of others (those who gather or snare smaller prey; see Henson, this volume). Biases such as these can be horribly influential and easily penetrate public opinion.

Conclusions

At the start of this chapter, I posed the question as to whether it should matter that a novelist departs from accepted archaeological facts in the creation of their text. On the surface, if the text is to be presented as a reasonable interpretation of past events, then the answer is clearly 'yes'. But, as we have seen, the question is not straightforward. Not only are the 'facts' open to multiple definitions, but also the boundaries within which they will be combined and presented may have their own preset limitations, as may the boundaries within which the audience makes their own interpretation of the reading or viewing. Within these strictures, there can be no clear-cut presentation of fact by either the creator or the consumer of the work.

Perhaps it is not so much the *role* of fact in popular writing that we need to worry about as the *definition* of fact in academic texts. If we can get away from ascribing a spurious factual nature to our 'interpretative' site reports, then it becomes clear that we are dealing with a greyscale of information and communication. Academic narrative is no more factual just because it is academic than popular narrative is fictional just because it is popular. Archaeological fact is indeed the foundation of all interpretation, whether academic or popular, but it is what we do with it that matters. It is just the springboard for what must follow—and without interpretation, it is

sterile. Excavation can give us the bowl. It can even give us traces of the cornflakes and the milk. But it requires imagination to combine them into breakfast. And even more imagination to communicate to others the significance of that breakfast to the people who ate it.

It is clear that I am an enthusiastic proponent of the value of incorporating fiction techniques into the archaeologist's repertoire in order to broaden our worldview. There remains, thus, one final question: is it possible to set out a list of rules and benefits, or should we all individually seek prospective authors with whom to collaborate? As the benefits are so personal and depend entirely on the individual, I would argue against trying to establish generalised interpretative toolkits. But, neither do I think that the acquisition of 'pet' novelists is necessary for everyone. It is, for example, possible to get students looking at the elements of Neolithic life that might be brought out in a novel, or to set an exercise wherein they try to make sense of a site report in terms of life as lived (which elements are glossed over; which would work together?). One can work with novels to reach back to the archaeological data on which they are based. Or consider novels written at different periods for evidence of bias. It is not necessary to go to the lengths of actually writing a novel in order to start to identify the weaknesses and gaps within our archaeological narratives. Perhaps the most valuable gift, however, is less particular. Whether valued as a tool for communication, or as a method by which to develop the professional skills of interpretation, surely the most valuable gift of fiction is the way in which it reminds us that archaeology is about people. It is easy to forget this when you spend days poring over an assemblage of stone tools or freezing in a muddy hollow, but in the end our narratives are nothing if they do not work in terms of human lives.

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3Voices from the silence

Margaret Elphinstone

Introduction

There comes a point in life when one realises that history is also about one's self. This awareness is often triggered by seeing material objects from one's childhood in a museum. It makes one realise viscerally that the abstraction we call history never physically existed. Leo Tolstoy pointed out long ago that history is made up of individuals, struggling through the confusing events, large or small, that make up their present time. One cannot theorise the present satisfactorily because one is living inside it. A cohesive, all-encompassing theory about what is going on now (at whatever moment 'now' happens to be) may be destroyed by a sleepless night or a knock at the door or an unexpected election result.

When I first participated in archaeological fieldwork, over 40 years ago, I assumed, without much thought, that the concepts and methods used on that dig were timeless; that what I was experiencing in that moment was just the way archaeology was. Further reading revealed to me that archaeology had its own history. Only several more decades of life, however, made me fully aware that the history of archaeology was continuing in front of my eyes. Moreover, I was part of it.

When one of my novels is cited on an undergraduate reading list, or in an archaeological journal, the recognition pleases me, for personal reasons no doubt, but also because this is something new. It is a step, I now realise, that for many years I passionately wanted to be taken. I had felt, but had not articulated even to myself, that something vital was missing from most (though not all) contemporaneous archaeological and historical accounts. In the 1980s I was researching my first novel, *Islanders* (Elphinstone 1994), set on Fair Isle and Papa Stour in the twelfth century ad. I delved into a recent archaeological report on Fair Isle (Hunter unpub.). As I recollect, it told me how many stones there were, and exactly how big, in every cairn and rickle on the island. But I had wanted to be told that the archaeologists had gazed upon the face of some Agamemnon out of Orkneyinga Saga. I

should have known—floundering as I was in the stormy seas of literary theory in my own department of English Literature—that I was living through archaeology’s processual phase.

My problem was that I wanted stories, and I wanted to make those stories into more stories. Decades later, when I took my granddaughter to Skara Brae in Orkney, I told her stories about the people who once lived in those houses, slept in those beds, cooked at those hearths, played on a beach just a bit farther out. Afterwards, she built a miniature Skara Brae out of beach stones on the sands of Skail Bay, and went on with the story. (A passing professor of archaeology from Massachusetts asked permission to take a photograph of Hannah to use in his lectures, which, no doubt, added another chapter of the narrative, and perhaps does so still.) The artists who draw the reconstructions for interpretation boards on archaeological sites do exactly the same thing as my granddaughter did. They reconstruct a landscape and material culture, and they fill it with imaginary individuals. Reading the boards, one can hone in on a particular person and imagine what it was like to be them.

All reconstructions belong primarily to their own time, more than they do to the past times they represent. Interpretation boards of the 1950s seem to us today to be dated, as do nineteenth-century novels about the Middle Ages. As with any revision of evidence and ideas, one must accept that one’s own efforts are never definitive. As they too slide away into the past, they become just another part of the story. But all of these links in the chain are what keep the story alive. Fiction is about the individuals who once lived in their own present. If we are to understand them, and indeed ourselves, it is important to keep asking, ‘What was it like to be them?’

Fiction begins with that question. Individuals from the distant past are seldom known to us by name. We have to create characters as like them as we can, based on what we do know. Tolstoy (2005) knew that a history of the War of 1812 could never be complete unless it recounted the whole experience of every individual caught up in the events of those times. Therefore, of course, the story can never be complete. But a medium that takes account of those individual lives can put the centre back into the narrative. A study of human activities, in any genre, needs to have human beings at its core, and this is what fiction can do for archaeology.

The medium

People tell each other stories. The ability and the need to construct narratives is one of our defining characteristics. Once human beings could put their memories and ideas into words, they were able to produce enabling narratives to attempt to make sense of their world. There is a price to be paid for acquiring language and being able to make stories out of inchoate experience. One is no longer simply of the surrounding world; one is a little detached, able to look at one's life and analyse it, and to be aware of oneself as one does so. The study of semiotics in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, originating with Ferdinand de Saussure's (1977) theories of linguistics, addresses the acquisition of language as the beginning of separation. We do not just exist; we know ourselves to be existing. We are not just part of our world; we also have words for it. We ask questions about it. How did it all begin and where will it end? What are we doing here? And why are we asking these questions, anyway, when, as far as we can tell, other animals do not?

It is a tautology to say that we inherit no stories from our prehistory, but it is also a conundrum when one tries to engage with our far-off human ancestors. We have no access to the stories that were told, for example, by the people who crossed what is now Europe, following the retreating ice northwards, preceded by the plants and animals that recolonised the chilly emerging tundra. Presumably those people told stories about ice and water, animals, plants and weather. As Doggerland gradually disappeared under what is now the North Sea, surely people passed on flood stories: stories about fertile plains and hunting lands lost under the sea. The great tsunami of c. 6500 bc, which devastated the east coast of what is now Britain, and the Low Countries, must have left plenty of tales in its wake (on the Storegga Slide tsunami, see also Henson, this volume). Doubtless too, people then were as intrigued by stories about one another as we are. Indeed, there are only a limited number of stories about human relationships in the world—the raw materials remain quite predictable even if they are rehashed in a great diversity of ways. How old, for example, is the plot of *Gilgamesh*, or *Oedipus* or *Hop o' my Thumb*?

We have no idea what stories were told in Europe before living memory merged into written records. Until the spread of Indo-European languages, we do not know what languages they were told in. We have no knowledge of any individual. We do not know anybody's name, or what they looked like, let alone what they thought or dreamed. But what we do know for certain is that there were

individuals. Henson (this volume) makes the important point that modern constructions of Mesolithic people tend to be generic; through lack of hard evidence, characterisation remains blank in the narrative. Mesolithic individuals lived in communities, and they worked and hunted together. Certainly they had names. They had language, and talked to one another. They had thoughts, desires and dreams. Undoubtedly they told stories. They did not live their lives in a deafening silence, any more than we do. It is only the communication between them and us that has broken down under the weight of passing millennia.

I was drawn to write a story set in what is now Scotland during the Mesolithic, around 8,000 years ago, because I was intrigued by that deafening silence, which hung, like an unbroken cloud, over my country's story. I had observed that books about Scottish—or British—prehistory usually begin with a sentence, a paragraph or occasionally even a short chapter, about the hunter-gatherers who preceded the Neolithic farmers. It occurred to me that this was a fairly summary way to deal with around 7,000 years of human history. I could also see the problem: in the absence of narratives, individuals, language or events, what is there to say? Or, in the terminology of fiction, how can one have a story without narrator, characters, words or plot?

When I mentioned to a friend that I was not used to working with so little evidence, he said, "Well, that makes it easier. You can just make it up". The assumption seemed to be that my project was closer to science fiction or fantasy than to serious historical fiction. Thinking over my indignation, I realised the importance to me of appreciating that the people I was writing about had told their own stories; they did not lack identity, individuality or necessary narratives. The process of writing about them was not so much about invention as it was about penetrating the silence that had fallen between us. My project seemed more like a process of discovery, working from whatever evidence I could lay hands on and coming as close as I could to those lost stories. As Wickham-Jones (this volume) points out, one is dealing with probabilities, not facts, but testing those probabilities is crucial, because 'good stories' are precisely how societies represent themselves, and how they interpret one another. There could be no definitive answer: I would never know for certain, and nor would anyone else, the extent to which I had got it right.

My previous two novels had been set in the nineteenth century, when the novel was a dominant genre. There are challenges about representing a time retrospectively when many contemporaneous

novelists had already defined the period in fiction to most readers' satisfaction. Why set a novel in 1812, for example, when Jane Austen had already done the job better than I ever would, while also having all the advantages of first-hand knowledge? Moreover, the nineteenth century presents a wealth of primary sources in all genres. What more can there possibly be to say? In my novel *Voyageurs* (Elphinstone 2003), set in 1812, only the principal characters are my own invention. Almost all minor characters existed as real people; I simply drew on primary, often unpublished, local sources, to reconstruct them. I had set two earlier novels during the Viking period in the North Atlantic. The Icelandic sagas provided established narratives, with plots, characters and voices, and I drew heavily upon those texts in all these respects. The sagas were not technically primary sources, but they drew upon an oral tradition and a locus that were lost to me in the twentieth century. The point being, that in my previous novels I had ready to hand all the ingredients of fiction. In effect, I revised inherited narratives, producing new versions shaped by elements of my own time and culture.

If any remnant of unbroken tradition links us to our Mesolithic past, it is now so subliminal that we are unaware of it. Narratives do not show in our DNA. But somehow it seemed important to acknowledge that broken link. At the heart of my reconstruction, I needed to show how the people told their own stories to one another for their own reasons. They had no novels—my book could not help but be a self-reflecting anachronism. But what I could do, within the novel form, was to hand the narrative back to the people to whom it belonged.

Gibb (this volume) raises ethical questions about the process of representing past societies to which one does not belong. Being aware of one's own subjectivity and cultural context is certainly necessary, but the whole project of fiction is that one has licence, and a medium, which make it possible to imagine what it is like to be somebody else. An interpretation is not a definition; rather, it is itself part of the narrative that has changed many times and will change again. New interpretations can erode the outdated platitudes of colonialism by eliciting empathy and making connections. I have discussed elsewhere the process of using other people's stories (Elphinstone & Wickham-Jones 2012). It is debatable territory, but that is precisely why it attracts evolving narratives. Good stories tackle the controversial issues; that is what they are for.

In *The Gathering Night* (Elphinstone 2009), the Auk people tell the

story to and for themselves. They tell it because it is vital to their well-being and identity that this story gets told. It is a story that needs to be heard, remembered and passed on to future generations. There is no single author: indeed, the concept of any author would be alien to this hunter-gatherer people. Stories develop from their shared experiences and are lodged in shared memory. Therefore the story is told at a gathering of the Auk people. Eight narrators share the telling. Sometimes they exchange words with their listeners, who are as vital a part of the narration as the speakers. The story is created out of the collective imagination of the Auk people, to be inherited by all their descendants.

In order to produce this fictional storytelling, I studied many narratives told by hunter-gatherer peoples. I shall have more to say about ethnographic parallels presently, but here I concentrate on how I used examples from later hunter-gatherer cultures to produce this plural narrative form. The usual cautions about the use of recent ethnographic parallels to support archaeological evidence are crucial in this respect.

Most of us are familiar with oral tradition in our own families or communities. We have probably heard stories about our ancestors which have never been written down, or which we did not receive through any written medium. My parents and grandparents told me stories about my great-grandparents, about uncles and aunts and cousins who were already dead, or whom I never met. I did not grow up in a hunter-gatherer society, so these stories were not told in very formal settings, and I did not listen very carefully, and my memory, addled by literacy at an early age, is not too good. My oral tradition is fragmentary, and what I have passed on to my descendants is more fragmentary still.

I have, however, occasionally had the good fortune to eavesdrop on oral traditions maintained in a less fragmentary way. In 1970 I was in Lapland on a student expedition. We camped near a Saami summer village on the shores of Lake Lulavatn, and we got to know some of the people in the village. There was a young student among them, Annalise, who spoke English and, I think, enjoyed acting as our interpreter. She spent many evenings by our campfire, and she also introduced us to her mother, who welcomed us into her tent and told us stories about where we were, which Annalise translated. I remember that the mountain above our camp, Mount Akka, was the Grandmother Mountain. It is not so much the content of the stories that remains with me 50 years later but the context: the wreathing

wood smoke, the hot tea in our enamel mugs, the smell of the reindeer-hide tent, the old lady (or so she seemed to us) speaking in a rhythm quite outside the normal give and take of daily chat.

I wrote my novel *Voyageurs* while working at Central Michigan University. Members of the Department of Native American Studies were helpful to me, as I needed Ojibwa characters in my novel and I was diffident lest, as an outsider to their culture, I misrepresented them. I was invited to sit in on a mentoring programme, designed for younger tribal members to encourage them into higher education. Our meetings were in a standard 1960s university lecture theatre, but before any narratives unfolded, the space was prepared by drumming and the burning of purifying sage. The context of the gathering thereby expanded. It became clear that the narratives we were about to hear were much more than intellectual exercises. They were about spirit and identity. I was aware of not belonging, of the gift of being permitted to attend, but I was also conscious that in some way I did belong. This way of approaching stories made sense to me. It stirred my imagination in a way that I recognised, although it was no longer central to the culture from which I came.

I have also used first-hand oral narratives from hunters, and in every instance they have turned out to mean something much more subtle than a lesson in hunting technique. In Michigan, I needed an account of a bear hunt for an episode in *Voyageurs*. A friend took me to see another tribal member who lived out in the woods. Although this man hardly addressed me directly, he talked about bear hunts to my friend and allowed me to take notes. I quickly found out what I had thought I wanted, but what I actually got was far more. I was listening to narratives about the community and the individual soul, precisely the subject matter which Henson (this volume) points out is so often missing from archaeological reconstructions. The stories were about bears, not hunters: who bears are, how they live and what they signify. There was one particular, extraordinary bear story that urgently needed to be told. That was the real story which I took and, with permission, transposed into my own narrative.

The next story came from a gamekeeper I met in Scotland, who had taken part in a deer hunt in Poland, where a herd of deer had been driven into a gully trap, like the Mesolithic deer trap on the Hebridean island of Rum (Love 2001: 109–12). Once again, the facts were useful, but they were not the crux of the story. There was a shift in perspective, which I would never have dreamed possible had I not heard it directly. That part of the story was not about the hunters but

about the deer.

Enquiries for a boar hunter in Umbria resulted in an interview with Maurizio, introduced to me as the best boar hunter in the province. A friend translated, but I could also pick up some of his story directly. Again, I got the information I needed, but the real story was not what I expected. The hero of Maurizio's story was his dog, who had been killed by a boar. Once again, an animal, not the hunter, somehow became the protagonist. The different language became a medium in itself. I had to concentrate hard on the words. Maurizio described the hunt as beginning when the first dog barks *al silenzio*. "The first dog barks to the stillness", I wrote hurriedly. Then I saw what I had written. The translation had made its own image, better than I ever could.

These narratives caused me to consider much more deeply the role of animals in the hunter-gatherer society I was attempting to portray. I have never hunted any living creature, so I needed these first-hand narratives to learn a little of how a hunter thinks. (I mean here, the kind of hunters who hunt to eat, and to live, who recognise their prey as living, sensate beings like themselves. Recreational or trophy hunting bought by strangers in order to kill animals about whom they know nothing, is another matter.) Sure enough, these hunters introduced me to ideas that I doubt I could have picked up from any written source. Certainly I had read books—for example, Hugh Brody's (2002) *The Other Side of Eden*—that placed the hunt at the heart of hunter-gatherer spirituality. Brody speaks of the terrible bargain we make when we come into the world: that in order for us to survive, others must die. Clearly successful hunters need to know the animals they hunt extremely well. But what is knowing in this context? I knew from my reading that shamanism in some form appears to be a major aspect of most hunter-gatherer societies (e.g. Vitebsky 2001; Harvey 2003; Aldhouse-Green & Aldhouse-Green 2005). Some of the cave paintings at Lascaux carry understanding to the point of identity, for example, in the figure of the antlered man (Windels 1949).

Most of my narrative sources were written records of oral narratives gleaned from hunter-gatherer people, by ethnographers from elsewhere, often long after the peoples themselves had adapted to an incoming culture and literacy. Sometimes the written narrative had been recorded by individuals from within those societies, but, self-evidently, oral tradition was no longer their sole medium. In any case, a written version of an oral narrative is necessarily a translation,

and, like all translations, it can never be identical to the original. Storytelling becomes more literary and linear, and less repetitive and interactive. Cohesion takes the place of immediacy. Allusions become fixed and dead metaphors replace instant comparisons.

While written records provided much content for my novel, my most useful secondary sources for narrative technique came from film. The Australian Aboriginal film *Ten Canoes* (de Meer 2006) showed me how the story can be allowed to unfold in its own time, taking just as long as it takes, and how events can be drawn out and dwelt upon according to their significance. It fascinated me that the German producer had shot the first scene and then asked for another take. The Aboriginal actors refused. The ancestors had lived through each scene once, and the respectful reliving of their story would therefore also go through each scene just once. To tell the story is to let it live again, and that must be done at the right time and in the right order. In the Canadian Inuit film *Atanarjuat: the Fast Runner* (Kunuk 2001), Inuit actors collectively re-enact a story of ancestral experience. Once again, this is a story that needs to be told, by the people and for the people. At the end, we suddenly see the actors in their twentieth-century clothes, walking around their village. We see that they are the inheritors of this story, that they belong to it and it to them. They were not acting out random roles but establishing core identities.

This final scene of *Atanarjuat* helped me resolve the question of the broken link between the storytellers 8,000 years ago and myself writing in the twenty-first century. Narrative techniques are ways of representation. If the human mind can imagine something, it will find a way to represent it. Media change over time, just as clothes do. When they are not being their own ancestors in the twenty-first-century medium of film, the Inuit actors in *Atanarjuat* wear jeans and leather jackets, not two layers of fur. Writing about my putative Mesolithic ancestors, I dress my story in the clothes of an oral storytelling, and in my imagination I live through the narrative, as told by the Auk people, while representing it in modern English words, initially on my computer screen, to be published in a twenty-first-century text.

In his book *La préhistoire du cinéma* (Azéma & Clottes 2015), Marc Azéma examines the paintings of animals in the Lascaux Cave, using the techniques of film. He demonstrates how the paintings accurately show the movements of gazelles, lions and other animals. The positions of the limbs, heads and tails are shown in sequence like the frames of a film. Azéma shows how the paintings can be made to

move in this medium. (The same effect may well have been achieved in the past by the flickering light of torches, deep underground.) In a sequence that seems like pure magic, Azéma shows the whole animal-filled wall at Lascaux begin to move. Cave painting merges into cinema, and the animals course across the plain, coming to life in a new medium, and yet represented just as they were over 16,000 years ago (Azéma 2015).

I am absolutely certain that the people who lived in the west of Scotland 8,000 years ago had a wealth of narrative and symbolic language to express what was in their minds. We have the evidence of prehistoric art forms elsewhere that, unlike spoken narrative, have survived the passage of time. Rock art from hunter-gatherer communities from South Africa to Scandinavia shows a sophisticated understanding of symbols and imaginative forms of communication.

We also have metaphorical meanings embedded in Mesolithic burials, across the North Sea in southern Scandinavia. The burial of a young woman with her newborn child at Vedbaek, in which the baby is laid on a swan's wing (Albrethsen & Petersen 1976), is a sign that may not be explicit to us now, but the human imagination allows us to empathise with and speculate about this act of symbolism. We will never know the exact significance of the red deer antler headdresses, found at Star Carr in North Yorkshire (Clark 1954), but we do not lack archetypes to which we can relate them, and so we can interpret these artefacts emotionally if not specifically. In other words, the images, where they do survive, live in our imaginations. They are communicated to us through art, and we in turn can pass on the story, transferring it to our own languages and media.

If the images they created still live for us, then we still have a way that connects us to the peoples of the distant past. Through their senses, they saw, heard, smelt, felt and tasted, just like we do. They had the same archetypal concepts, and they used similar images to represent them. They must have felt the same raw emotions as we do, for example, at the burial of the young mother and her child at Vedbaek, though mediated by a very different culture and environment. None of this is surprising, given that we are all human beings, sharing the same DNA. Eight thousand years is not a long time in terms of evolution.

As a novelist, I find this crucial. In real life it is impossible to get inside the mind of another person, but, arguably, the ability to empathise is what makes us human, or at least moderately bearable. Fiction allows us to do what real life does not: to inhabit someone

else's consciousness and find out what it is to be them. It is fiction, of course, but that is precisely what the genre of fiction offers that other genres cannot. A fictional story set in Mesolithic Scotland should pay the same rigorous attention to material evidence and accuracy as an archaeological excavation report. But the nature of the genre demands larger imaginative leaps, always based on that evidence. This means using the material evidence in a different way, as we shall see below.

Imagining what it is like to be somebody else is not about projecting one's mind far away and long ago. It is about finding your character right next to you, human like yourself, with human feelings and perceptions. Steven Mithen (2000) writes about standing on the hill above an excavation on Islay, attempting to see the landscape through the eyes of one of the inhabitants who lived there thousands of years earlier. Not all archaeologists make that imaginative leap, and it is not a prerequisite for writing an archaeological report. But imagination is vital if one is to begin to reconstruct what it may have been like to belong.

At an excavation on Coll in the Inner Hebrides, I found a microlith embedded in a raised beach. I held it in my palm and realised that the last person who held that small stone point in their hand was the one who dropped it. It came straight from their warm hand to mine. The years between ceased to matter. These people inhabited the same patch of earth. Take away time—a mere bagatelle—and we are sitting on the same spot. I look around me, and much—though not all—of what I see is precisely what they saw. I smell the sea. I touch the grass. I am thirsty; I have a drink of water. We both do.

The material

The connection between twenty-first-century narrative and the community that lived in Scotland 8,000 years ago is grounded in shared place and shared materials. The hard evidence of the past is in the earth itself, in the landscape and the archaeology. Taking account of sea-level rise (Mithen 2000, 2003), the formations of the land and sea of Argyll and the Inner Hebrides have shaped the lives and perceptions of everyone who has ever belonged here. I tried to look at the sea and the islands through the eyes of those who inhabited the area 8,000 years ago. I relied on studies of how hunter-gatherers may have inhabited their land. I drew, for example, upon Woodman's (1985) archaeological report from Northern Ireland, which constructed a model, based on a specific landscape, of how hunter-

gatherers may have moved seasonally through their territory.

I talked to those who hunt and gather in these lands still: mariners, gamekeepers, fishers, poachers, botanists and herbalists. The mountains have not changed much, nor have the tides and currents. Many plants have been there since the last ice melted. For many creatures, 8,000 years is a relatively short time in which to change habits. It was strange to hear (by word of mouth) that a Mesolithic hunting camp on Islay has been uncovered exactly where the deerstalkers today begin their hunt. Even stranger is when the landscape corroborates a fictional hypothesis. Searching Loch Sunart for a location for the fictional camp in *The Gathering Night*, I found the kirk located, like many ancient religious sites, on a natural salient, close to an accessible beach. No one can prove that this was not a significant meeting place eight millennia ago, any more than they can prove that a nineteenth-century fish trap on, say, Coll or Assynt, was not used as a fish trap, like the ones in Mesolithic southern Scandinavia.

This is the difference between how a fiction writer makes inferences from the evidence of landscape and archaeology, and how an archaeologist or anthropologist does. My question often has to be, “Is there firm proof that this could *not* have happened?” I have to assert probabilities as facts, but with the same respect for the evidence as those whose job it is to keep all unsubstantiated questions open. This was acknowledged in a review of *The Gathering Night* in the archaeological journal *Antiquity*, in which the Reviews Editor remarked that, since I had done the necessary homework, “Elphinstone’s guess is as good as anyone’s” (Hummler 2009). I cannot, for example, have my characters, lined up on a beach ready to set forth on their adventures, stop and say to one another, “Do you think we have a skin boat or a dugout? If we have a skin boat, is it built like a coracle or a curragh? Do we paddle or row, do you think? And have we invented the sail yet?”

This is why audiences of archaeologists can be nerve-racking in anticipation, though I have never found them so in reality. In *The Gathering Night*, for example, my characters use a sail to get to White Beach Island; I had decided that anyone who made these Hebridean crossings regularly in a keelless boat would soon notice that a following wind could be exploited. When I gave a talk to archaeologists at the Landesmuseum in Hannover, this topic sparked an intense discussion, mostly in German too fast for me to follow. I wanted to call out, “All right, all right, I take it back. They didn’t have

a sail". But in the end it was conceded that no one could prove that a sail was not a possibility.

Here and there in the landscape of that novel's setting, there are Mesolithic sites, some postulated, some proven, some excavated. I used these sites as fixed reference points from which to construct a possible seasonal round. For example, River Mouth Camp is close to where microliths were found at Dervaig on Mull. Loch Island camp is located at Risga in Loch Sunart. One of my characters comes from the north, from Bloodstone Island. Flint Camp is right by one of the few Hebridean beaches that yield natural flint. I also visited sites outwith the Auk people's hunting lands, from Oronsay to Orkney.

At the beginning of my research, I was looking for a plot. How do you start a narrative set in a period spanning 7,000 years or so, in which we know of no single, specific event? Plots are measured by the yardstick of human lives. Gradual change over thousands of years is not, in human terms, a plot. I needed an event, based on concrete physical evidence, and sure enough I found one, occurring around 6500 bc, on the eastern seaboard of what is now Great Britain. The great tsunami must have devastated the communities who lived on the east coast at that time. Sue Dawson, who has made an extensive study of the event, was able to give me useful details about season, time and extent. A plot begins when the routine sequence of life is disrupted, and unexpected events happen fast enough to have life-changing impacts on individuals. My plot began one morning in early autumn. I could be sure of that from the material evidence, such as the cherry stones found in the sediments deposited by the tsunami (Dawson, pers. comm.; Dawson & Smith 2000: esp. 77). The point of telling the story is that, when events have run their course, nothing will be quite the same again. A tsunami meets all these criteria. Using eyewitness accounts, posted on the Internet, from the tsunami of 2004, I was able to imagine what it would have been like to be one of the people caught up in the tsunami 8,000 years earlier. My account was grounded in scientific evidence of the past event, coupled with first-hand descriptions of a similar event within living memory.

Conjectures about narrative and plot, research into ethnographic parallels from hunter-gatherer societies worldwide, exploration of landscapes and seascapes, all these endeavours seemed to circle around, spiralling ever closer to the central point: the people themselves. At the heart of my search was the archaeological record, the faint traces that individuals had left behind them.

The Gathering Night project was not the first time I had found a way

into characters through archaeology. My first novel, *Islanders*, arose directly out of my earliest experience as a volunteer on a dig in the 1970s at a Norse settlement on the island of Papa Stour in Shetland (Crawford & Ballin Smith 1999). I found that the experience of spending many days on the same site, scraping away with a trowel, gave me scope to imagine what it had actually been like to dwell in this place. Each time my scrapings revealed yet another spindle whorl, I found myself speculating about who had strung it, who had used it and who had lost it. The loom would have stood right over me, in the very spot where I was working. I had seen a working reconstruction of such a loom; I knew what it would have looked like. What was being woven, I wondered, and what was the weaver thinking about while she did it? Was she old or young? Content or desperate? Was she thrall or free? Did she sing or swear, chat or quarrel?

I find in any dwelling or homestead my mind is often drawn to those who inhabited it before I came along. On the dig, those vanished lives were the whole object of the exercise, yet in envisaging them, the focus was quite subtle, like glimpsing something out of the corner of one's eye. The nature of the work did not force swift conclusions. It allowed my mind to drift around the possibilities of those who had lived here before. Using other evidence we had concerning the site—a document of ad 1299, oral tales, place names, knowledge of the island itself—I thought about a scene described in the written source that may well have happened on this very spot. As the scale and originality of the site revealed itself over the years of the dig, so the story in my mind began to grow, until it turned into a novel.

On Mesolithic sites in Scotland, the material evidence is scanty in comparison with what a writer needs to know, but the weight of implication is correspondingly greater. Sorting gravel as a volunteer at an excavation at Long Howe, Orkney, I found a small black object, a fragment of a burnt hazelnut shell, later radiocarbon dated to c. 6500 bc. The implications for formulating Orcadian prehistory are no doubt significant. But, maybe because I had been the first to hold it in my hand, the imperative question for me was, “Who?” Someone was right here, eating hazelnuts. History can sometimes seem to be just so much narrative: unreliable, conflicting, partisan, fantastic, words without substance. Material evidence may not yield up its meanings easily—inferring meanings from finds can generate narrative upon narrative—but a physical object is uncompromisingly there. Throughout my research into the Mesolithic, I had a strong sense that I had to get my hands, quite literally, on the material realities of my characters' lives.

I became aware of my own inadequacy. As I write, a small harvest of hazelnuts ripens on my windowsill. In Mesolithic Scotland, hazelnuts were probably a staple winter food for many, as the destroyed hazel grove at Staosnaig, Colonsay, suggests (Mithen et al. 2001). I live in a culture that has lost not only the skills to live off its own land but also the ability even to imagine doing so. I am reminded of the diaries of John Franklin, in which he describes the dreadful barren wilderness surrounding the frozen *HMS Erebus* and *Terror*, in which there is nothing whatsoever to eat. Then he remarks, more than once, on sightings of Inuit parties, crossing the ice by sledge. Of all the explorers of the Northwest Passage, only John Rae fully understood and addressed the question of what he did not know (Beattie & Geiger 1987; McGoogan 2002, 2012). Rae realised that he lacked an affinity with the land that was fundamental to Inuit culture, and that he needed to learn from them. For him it was not only a matter of basic survival, but of developing an intelligence that he knew he lacked. My life is not at stake, but in writing about people whose skills are lost to me, I think it vital to bear in mind how deskilled I am. Like Rae (but less brave), I have to understand and address what I do not know.

Watching a Ray Mears TV programme about hunter-gatherers in Arnhem Land, Australia (see Mears & Hillman 2007), I was struck by the way the gatherers used all their five senses, as well as their depth of knowledge, to search for and gather food. An image stays with me of a woman's hand, delving into the dry soil for wild yams. Her hand is vibrant, questing, aware; it moves through the soil with a supple certainty that my hands have never learned. I think of her now when I feel in my garden soil for cultivated potatoes, or when I gather berries, hazelnuts, chanterelles or mussels. I try to think through the tips of my fingers as she seemed to do. I draw on my own knowledge in other ways: I know what it feels like, for example, to skin a rabbit, pluck a chicken or cook freshly caught trout over an open fire. But the plants, animals and environment of my twenty-first-century domestic life are quite unlike those of my Mesolithic forebears, and such comparisons must be treated cautiously, because my agricultural and industrial culture has also shaped my perceptions in an entirely different way. My hunting and gathering skills have diminished frighteningly, but not completely beyond recall. To imagine what it was like to be my Mesolithic characters, I sometimes found the most immediate form of research was to leave my head—stuffed as it was with anachronistic signals—out of the equation and start to use my hands.

With my hands I knapped flint, and made fire from wood and

tinder. I caught wriggling elvers between my fingers. I scraped fresh hides and stretched them out to dry. I wove a basket, and constructed a coracle out of hazel, willow and rawhide. My flints are chunky and blunt, and my basket is terminally crooked (the coracle, for which I had expert help, is quite good), but my first objective was to experience the process so that I could then find words for it. The more skilled I became, the more sharply honed my words became too. Details emerged. For example, through learning to handle the coracle afloat, I could describe how the character Haizea in *The Gathering Night* feels the sea moving against her feet through the boat skin. I would never have thought of that if I had not felt it myself.

Experimental archaeology is very useful for reconstructing technologies, and it is also helpful when one is trying to reconstruct experience. Characters in a novel have to appear to be alive and sensate. Fiction is made out of words and nothing else. It can only work if the characters appear to be real. They must ‘come alive’ or ‘leap off the page’ or ‘run away with the book’. These clichés are common ways of describing what can be seen as a successful conjuring trick. Readers must subscribe, against all better judgement, to the illusion that these invented people actually exist. Furthermore, they can go beyond empathy to identification, and know what it is like to live inside their minds and bodies. Above all, readers should care what happens to the characters, just as if it were happening to themselves.

Conclusions

In the absence of inherited narratives from our prehistoric forebears, fiction set in prehistory has to be grounded in environmental context and material evidence. The methods and results of archaeological research can be used for imaginative reconstruction of the past in the different genre of fiction. This ought not to involve a diminution of academic rigour. The same research has to be done, drawing upon the same discoveries and sources. Writing fiction based on archaeological evidence requires that one listen carefully to archaeological discourse and debate. But the novelist has no choice but to reach definitive conclusions, however insubstantial the evidence available. Absence of evidence cannot in this genre lead to absence of any necessary fact or presence within the fictional world. Informed guesses have to become certainties within the text. The genre demands specificity and precision, as with the question of the sail discussed above, because the novelist has to create the illusion of an existing world, in which there

can be no doubt about any detail. If the authority that sustains that fictional world falters, makes glaring mistakes or appears to be uncertain, the illusion simply vanishes.

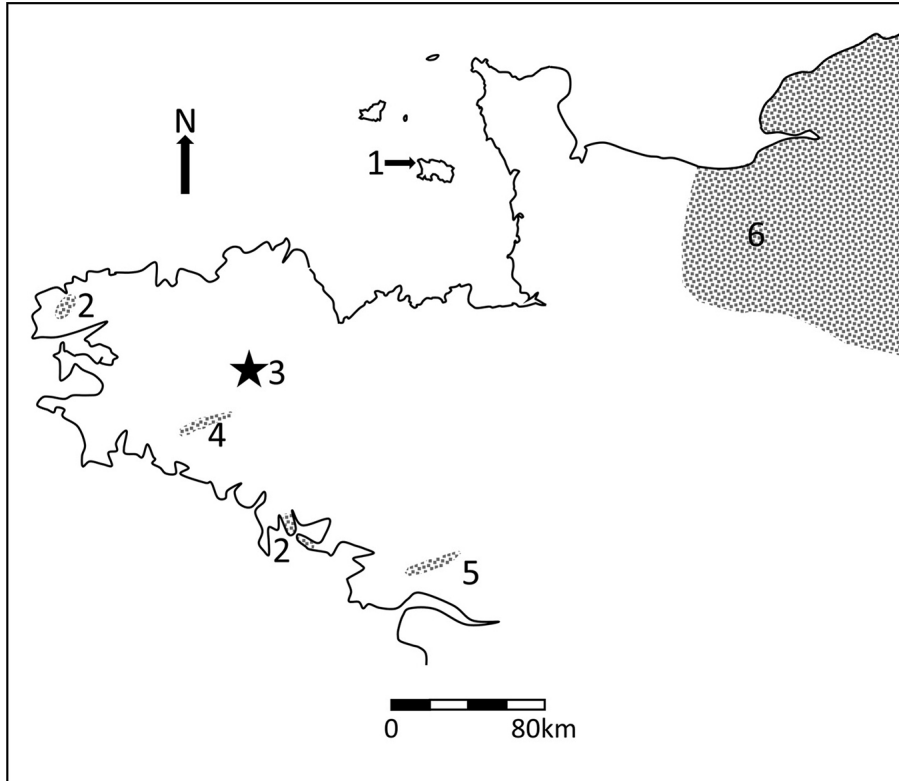
The fiction writer must study the context, learn from experience and observation, and listen to the debate as carefully as anyone else who reinterprets the past in any other genre. But, based on this firm foundation, the writer's imaginative leap has to be greater. If the reader is to enter the fictional world, that world must have no gaps in it. It must be imagined in its entirety, from the breadth of landscape and seascape, to the depth of thoughts and feelings inside a person's head. The assertions it makes about the past world can never be verified. But they must be within the bounds of probability and in accordance with whatever evidence there is.

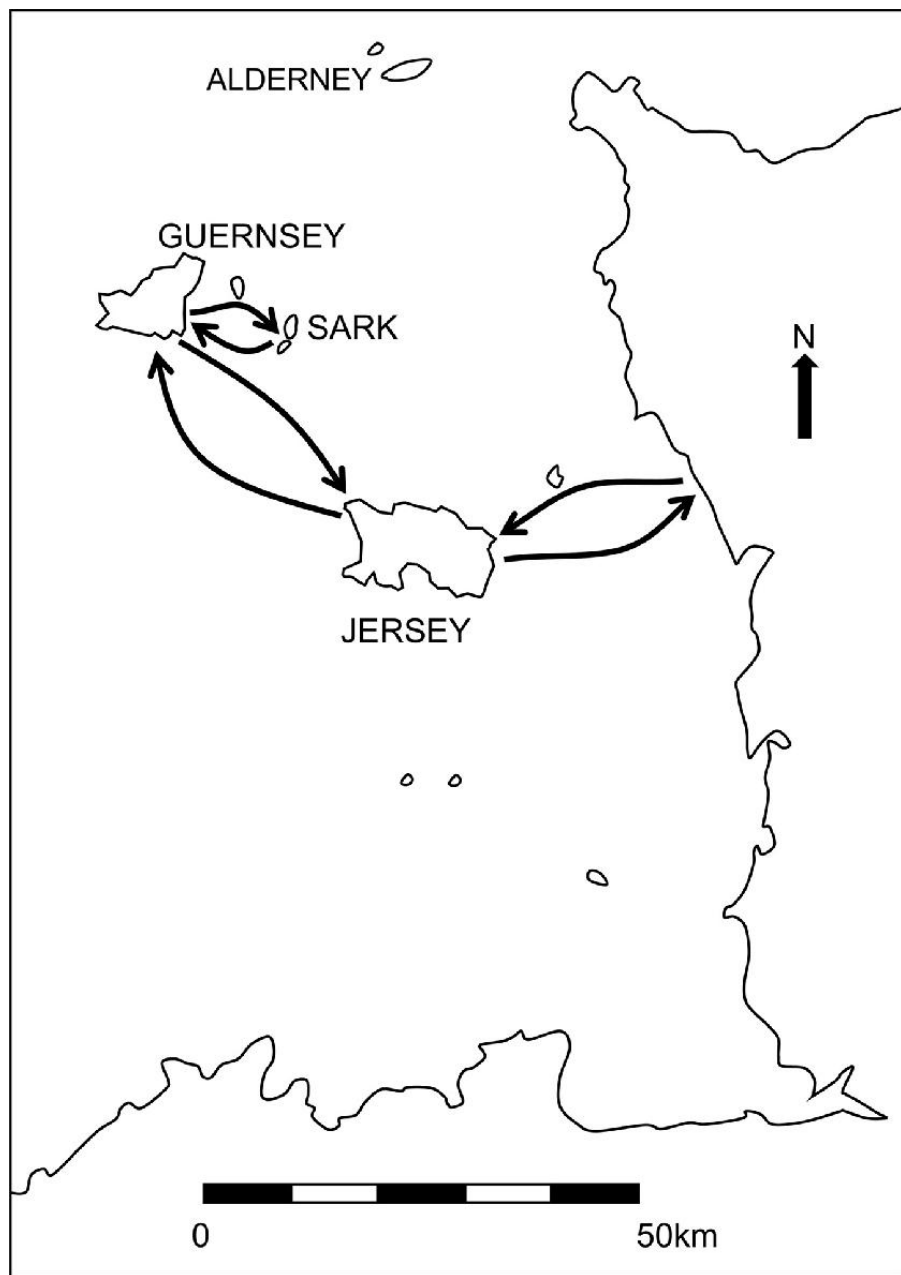
We pursue archaeology for what it can tell us about our human past. Like any study of human activity, it needs to relate to real people and individual experience. This is what the historical novelist can do for archaeology. It allows the individual reader to empathise and identify with other individuals across the distances of time. It offers the experience, albeit vicarious, of what it was like to live back then. It allows the reader to care about what happened, in the same way as they care about what happens in the present. A fictional narrative is a paradox. Readers come to it expecting an imaginary narrative—a fiction. But, for the story to speak to them, they must care enough to suspend all disbelief and accept it, at least while they read it, and perhaps for longer, as truth. And rightly so, because, as long as the narrative is working properly, within its own terms, it is.

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4Beyond archaeological narrative

Imagined worlds of Neolithic Europe

Mark Patton

Introduction

This chapter is written from the perspective of an archaeologist who subsequently became an author of three novels (Patton 2012, 2013, 2014), each of them drawing directly on archaeological evidence. Because it is, at least in part, a personal reflection, it seems appropriate to break with some of the conventions of academic/scientific writing, for example, by using the first person, as others have done in similar circumstances (e.g. Elphinstone & Wickham-Jones 2012; Pryor 2014; Tringham 2015; see Praetzelis, this volume).

During the course of an archaeological career spanning 18 years (from 1984 to 2002), I authored and co-authored a number of academic books and articles, ranging from site-specific monographs based on excavation and fieldwork (Patton et al. 1999; Patton & Finlaison 2001), to re-analysis of earlier fieldwork (Patton 1991a, 2001), and works of synthesis (Patton 1991b, 1994, 1995). The Neolithic of the Channel Islands and north-western France was the primary (but not exclusive) focus of these works. After 2002, my professional activities took me in other directions, including politics, historical biography (Patton 2007), academic leadership, and, finally, novel writing.

It should be said from the outset that my ambitions, in writing my three novels, were literary rather than archaeological. They were motivated by my passion for fiction in general, and historical fiction in particular, which has always been part of my cultural and intellectual 'hinterland'. The novels were not intended as contributions to archaeological discourse. Rather, I saw my earlier academic career as a source of material for my fiction, and my background as an archaeologist as one of the factors that might allow me to differentiate my writing from that of other novelists. It is only with hindsight, and in the light of subsequent academic discussions (Elphinstone & Wickham-Jones 2012; Pryor 2014; Van Dyke & Bernbeck 2015), that I find myself asking whether these novels might, after all, have some value as contributions to archaeological practice.

Despite this, even as I was researching and writing the novels, I found myself interrogating the archaeological evidence in ways that had not occurred to me during the course of my academic career (sometimes, indeed, in ways that might, in an academic context, have been regarded as inappropriate). The existence of questions to which the archaeological record cannot provide straightforward answers, or may do so only in exceptional circumstances, poses a methodological/

epistemological problem for the archaeologist, but is an opportunity for “world building” on the part of a fiction writer, one which he or she must grasp in order to write a convincing and engaging story. Often, as an archaeologist, I was conscious of teetering in a precarious position at the very top of Christopher Hawkes’ (1954) “ladder of inference”. From this perspective, the transition to fiction writing was like learning to fly: the viewpoints that had previously been inaccessible to me became the basis of a new engagement with the material evidence for the human past.

One way of seeing the process of fictionalisation, in this context, is as a sort of *translation* from the language appropriately and necessarily employed by archaeologists (sites, stratigraphy, artefacts, distribution patterns, scientific analyses, taphonomy, social processes and symbolism) into that employed by storytellers and writers of fiction (personalities, intentions, human relationships, desires and emotions, conversations, metaphors and similes). The process by which I have crafted dialogue in my novels has sometimes involved a literal translation of sentences from one language to another (e.g. from English into Latin in my second novel, *An Accidental King* (Patton 2013), set in early Roman Britain) and back again. Marguerite Yourcenar (1974) employs a similar approach in her novel *Memoirs of Hadrian*. My aim in this chapter is to explore the extent to which the metaphorical ‘translation’ involved in writing fiction based on archaeological evidence may similarly inform the practice of archaeological interpretation itself. In the next section, I briefly introduce my first and third novels, *Undreamed Shores* (2012) and *Omphalos* (2014), before reflecting on the overlaps between my academic and fictional writing.

Historical or archaeological fiction?

‘Historical fiction’ (the genre category into which publishers and booksellers place my novels, despite their *prehistoric* settings—the term ‘palaeofiction’, coined by palaeontologist-turned-novelist Bjorn Kurten [1982] has never caught on) can be positioned anywhere along a continuum defined by the following two quotes:

I will make up the contents of a man’s heart, but I will not make up the colour of his drawing room wall. I would rather move the discussion to his study, where I do know the colour of the wall.

(Dame Hilary Mantel 2011)

I'm not interested in getting the facts right. I'm interested in telling lies about the past, so that I can investigate and look at modern sensibilities.

(Jim Crace 2013)

Having decided to write the novels under my own name, my academic background seemed to me to presuppose a conceptual position closer to that of Mantel than to that of Crace. *Undreamed Shores* (Patton 2012) is set c. 2400 bc, and draws directly on my doctoral research (Patton 1995). It is structured around a journey over land and sea, from Jersey to northern France (my protagonist, Amzai, having recently come of age, is on his first trading voyage); continuing, accidentally, to southern Britain (where Amzai is shipwrecked) and back to northern France and the Channel Islands (a deliberate voyage of discovery on the part of Amzai's companions). It followed naturally that I would take my protagonist in *Undreamed Shores* to specific archaeological sites (including Stonehenge, Durrington Walls, Hengistbury Head and Belle Tout in Britain; Mannez on Alderney; L'Ancrese on Guernsey; Les Mielles, La Hougue Bie and Ville-ès-Nouaux on Jersey) and base my descriptions of those locations as closely as possible on the published archaeological evidence available to me at the time. Some of my characters in the novel are based on specific archaeological discoveries: the 'Amesbury Archer' and the 'Boscombe Bowmen' (Fitzpatrick 2011); a subplot provides a fictional explanation for the circumstances of the death and burial of the 'bowmen', going far beyond the bounds of formal archaeological inference.

Omphalos (Patton 2014) is a different sort of novel, and draws extensively on my own excavations at La Hougue Bie, Jersey (Patton et al. 1999). Taking its inspiration from novels by David Mitchell (2004) and Italo Calvino (1992), it consists of six narrative arcs, nested inside one another like a set of Russian *matryoshka* dolls set, respectively, in the present day; the 1940s; the 1790s; the 1510s; the 1160s; and the fifth millennium bc. It is only this final story, "The Song of Strangers", that is of direct concern here. Taken as a whole, however, *Omphalos* is more fully an 'archaeological' (as distinct from 'historical') novel, in that each of the stories is suggested by a stratigraphic unit at La Hougue Bie (although much of the action takes place elsewhere; for a similar technique, see Michener 1965). The structure of the novel mirrors the process of archaeological discovery, first digging down through the strata, and then, through the post-

excavation process, building up a coherent understanding of the site in its broader context. The stories are linked, not only by the site itself (which comes centre stage only at the very end of the novel) and by suggested genealogical connections between characters, as in more conventional historical novels by, for example, James A. Michener (1959) and Edward Rutherfurd (1987), but also by archaeological objects, both real and imagined, which belong in one period and turn up in another.

Undreamed Shores and *Omphalos* are, similarly, linked by objects, but also by a subplot. In the first novel, set in the third millennium bc, Amzai and his companions find their way back to the Channel Islands with the help of an ancient poem, ‘The Song of Txeru’, that he learned in his youth. In *Omphalos*, when the reader encounters the final set of characters in ‘The Song of Strangers’, set around 2,000 years earlier, one of these characters is Txeru himself, but the story is narrated from the point of view of his lover, the sorceress Egrasté. Her experience of the journey they undertake together differs in certain important respects from the version subsequently related by their (male) descendants.

Having introduced the novels that form the basis of this chapter, I will now explore some broad themes that feature both in my academic writing and in my novels: food and daily life, exchange and navigation, ritual and religious change, the structure of Neolithic societies and the nature of oral traditions.

Food and daily life

It has long been understood that farming was the primary basis of Neolithic life in Europe. Evidence of cereal cultivation has been found on innumerable sites, along with the bones of domesticated cattle, sheep, goats and pigs. At the site of Le Pinnacle, Jersey (Patton 2001), there is also evidence for domesticated broad beans (*Vicia faba*) from c. 2400 bc. In my archaeological publications (Patton 1994, 1995; Patton & Finlaison 2001), I discuss the Neolithic economy of the Channel Islands and north-western France. Noting the overwhelmingly coastal distribution of Early and Middle Neolithic sites in the region, and following Renfrew (1976), I assumed that coastal resources would also have been used extensively.

In fiction, it is not sufficient to say that people kept domestic cattle, grew wheat and fished. Readers of novels do not want to be told that Neolithic people made cheese; rather, they expect to experience

cheese being made. When characters sit down for a meal, readers expect to have some sense of its tastes and smells. Accordingly, as I wrote *Undreamed Shores*, I devised various recipes, all of which could have been made with resources available to Neolithic communities. These are, of course, wholly fictional.

In procuring ingredients for these meals, my characters in that novel do a great deal of fishing. I was aware of stable isotope research (e.g. Richards & Hedges 1999) that pointed to a sharp and rapid decline in the exploitation of coastal resources from an early stage, but I was also aware of contrary arguments (e.g. Milner et al. 2004), and did not believe that coastal communities (and especially not insular ones) would simply have abandoned coastal resources. I made the same assumption in writing the early drafts of ‘The Song of Strangers’, but, at the editing stage, revisited the archaeological literature and found that the consensus had shifted firmly towards the arguments of Richards and Hedges (1999). Accordingly, in the published version of *Omphalos*, Egrasté resorts to fishing only when faced with the possibility of starvation, and does not really know how to do it (she ends up stealing a salmon from an otter):

Where there were otters [...] there must be fish. It was said that the grandfathers and grandmothers used to catch and eat fish, before the days of Basajaun and Jakomé [...] It was a large salmon, and the otter had devoured only a small part of it. She washed it off in the river, and took it back to her shelter to cook. Soon its strange, oily aromas filled the air. She was not used to the taste of fish [...] but it was food of a sort and, if it could sustain the heron and the otter, surely it could also sustain her.

(Patton 2014: 157–58)

This example of a late modification underlines one of the pitfalls of fictionalising the remote, as opposed to the more recent, past. The further back in time the novelist goes, the greater the likelihood that subsequent discoveries may invalidate aspects of his or her story. This is often more dramatically the case when dealing with archaeological, rather than textual, evidence.

Exchange and navigation

A key focus of my archaeological publications has been on exchange between the Neolithic communities of the Channel Islands, and those

of north-western France. Imported stone axes (Patton 1991a-d, 1995) provide the most significant evidence for this, although blades and arrowheads of flint from Grand-Pressigny (Indre-et-Loire) have also been found on Channel Island sites (Patton 2001).

The identifiable sources of stone axes found on the Channel Islands are shown in [Figure 4.1](#). Axes of ‘Type P’ dolerite (Patton 1991a), from Le Pinacle, Jersey (Source 1) have been found on all of the Channel Islands, but not on the French mainland. Axes from Armorican mainland sources (Sources 2–6) have been found on the larger islands of Jersey, Guernsey, Alderney and Sark, but not on the smaller island of Herm. These mainland axes, however, form a larger element of the assemblage from Jersey, as compared with the assemblages from the other islands (Patton 1991c). No axes from identifiable sources in Britain or Ireland have ever been found either in the Channel Islands or in northern France, but four axes of Type A dolerite, from Plussulien in central Brittany, have been recorded on the British mainland (Evens et al. 1962; Le Roux 1979). Axes of eclogite (Source 5) are frequently difficult to distinguish by eye from those made of jadeite (probably from the Italian Alps), but both are found on the Channel Islands and many ‘jadeite’ axes have been recorded (Petrequin et al. 2013; Woolley et al. 1979) from various parts of the British Isles.

Figure 4.1 Sources of grouped stone axes in the Armorican area. 1 Type P dolerite; 2 Fibrolite; 3 Type A Dolerite; 4 Type B epidiorite (not identified in the Channel Islands); 5 Eclogite; 6 Flint

Source: Patton (1991c); redrawn by Robert Witcher.

No remains of Neolithic sea-craft have been recovered from the Channel Islands, or from adjacent continental areas, but broader surveys (e.g. Johnstone 1988) have emphasised the lack of evidence for sailing vessels in any part of northern Europe at this stage in prehistory. I therefore assumed, in all my published works (archaeological and fictional), that Neolithic vessels in the area would have been rowed or paddled (though see also, Elphinstone, this volume—fiction writers choose their assumptions).

Experimental research in a skin-covered boat propelled by six oarsmen (Johnstone 1988) suggests an average speed of three knots, meaning that 18 nautical miles could be covered within the space of a single six-hour tide. This would make journeys between Jersey and the Cotentin Peninsula, between Jersey and Guernsey or Sark, and between Guernsey and Alderney much easier and more predictable

than, for example, direct journeys between Guernsey and the Cotentin Peninsula. This, in conjunction with the fall-off in the proportions of mainland axes between Jersey and the other islands, suggested to me (Patton 1991c) the pattern of exchanges shown in [Figure 4.2](#) (I was also informed here by my own youthful experience as a yachtsman and open-water swimmer in Channel Island waters). This is reflected in the plot of *Undreamed Shores*, in which Amzai, making his way back to Jersey from southern Britain, on arriving at the north-western tip of the Cotentin Peninsula, and keen to avoid a village further down the coast where he has made an enemy, completes his journey by travelling via Alderney and Guernsey.

[Figure 4.2](#) Conjectural reconstruction of axe exchange networks in the Channel Islands

Source: Patton (1991c); redrawn by Robert Witcher.

Most of the stone axes used by Neolithic communities in the Channel Islands are identifiably of local rock, and these axes are in no way functionally inferior to the imported axes. Why, then, were these exchanges undertaken at all? In my archaeological publications (Patton 1991a, 1991c, 1991d; 1995), I suggested that the imported axes must have had some symbolic or mythological significance, perhaps linked to the specific places from which the rock was derived. In the novels, I explored this further, again going beyond the limits of most definitions of archaeological inference.

In *Undreamed Shores*, as Amzai walks with Nanti (the daughter of Arthmael—the ‘Amesbury Archer’) from Abbotsbury (the place Amzai came ashore) to her father’s village (Durrington Walls), they encounter a group of herdsman, who have been trading on the coast with other men from overseas, and have obtained an axe: Amzai immediately thinks about his lost companions.

The axe was in a simple wooden haft, but it was the blade that interested Amzai. He examined it, trying hard to remember his conversations with his uncle, and with the men of Alarain [...] “This is a Gau-Tirin axe! It comes from the centre of Aramaio. We were on our way back from Aramaio to Andis, and we had some of these axes with us in the boat”. “Are you sure?” Nanti asked. “How can you tell where an axe comes from just by looking at it?” Amzai held the axe up to her and pointed to the green flecks.

(Patton 2012: 75)

A ‘Gau-Tirin’ axe is an axe from Plussulien (Source 3 in [Figure 4.1](#))

and thus one of the four such axes recorded (Evens et al. 1962; Le Roux 1979) from the British mainland (I recall commenting to a student that four axes were more likely to add up to a shipwreck than a trade route). The etymology is from ‘gift of Tirin’, the latter being a mythological ancestor who either came from Plussulien or first discovered this particular stone. Later in the story, Amzai receives a new axe from Nanti’s father:

Arthmael placed a hand on Amzai’s shoulder. “I have brought you a new axe to carry with you”. Jeysa handed Arthmael a hafted axe with a copper blade, which he passed on to Amzai. Amzai removed Gau-Ethan from his belt-pouch, handing it to Jeysa and putting Gau-Arthmael in its place.

(Patton 2012: 235)

Where ‘Gau-Tirin’, above, refers to a category of axes, ‘Gau-Ethan’ and ‘Gau-Arthmael’, here, refer to specific axes, which take their significance from the circumstances under which Amzai has acquired them, an example of ‘inalienable wealth’ (Weiner 1992).

These exchanges, however, are not always voluntary. One of the most precious objects owned by Amzai’s people is a jadeite axe blade, Gau-Txeru, and they know that Txeru, an ancestor, has brought this to the island from overseas. It is, in fact, a real object, discovered in the field immediately to the east of La Hougue Bie, and now in the collection of the Jersey Museum. When the reader of *Omphalos* encounters Txeru, he reveals to his lover that he has obtained the axe blade, together with other treasures, by trickery, and that at least one person has died in his quest to obtain them (unmentioned in the story handed down to Amzai by his male ancestors, but recounted by a female descendant of Egrasté).

The archaeological record provides almost no evidence for direct contact between the Neolithic communities of the Channel Islands and those of the British Isles, although a number of authors (e.g. Cunliffe 2013; Cunliffe & Koch 2012; Sheridan 2010) have pointed to mounting circumstantial evidence that some such contacts must have existed, if only on an occasional basis. In the novels, I deal with this by introducing characters who have made unplanned journeys, from which they have never returned. In *Undreamed Shores*, for example, Amzai meets a fellow islander at Durrington Walls, shipwrecked many years previously in circumstances not unlike his own. Later, on Alderney, he and his companions meet a Scillonian man, swept off

course during a whaling expedition. This explanation may not be thought by all colleagues to be a satisfactory one. But I was faced with a dilemma: it was not that I found the evidence for contact presented by Sheridan (2010) and others to be unconvincing (on the contrary, I find it compelling), merely that I struggled to ‘translate’ this evidence into the language of individual actions and conversations between individuals on which a novel depends. This, on one level, is assuredly a novelist’s, and not an archaeologist’s, problem; and yet this process of ‘translate’ is, perhaps, at the crux of the role that fiction writing can play in the process of archaeological discourse itself.

I very deliberately set *Undreamed Shores* at the point of transition between the Neolithic and the Chalcolithic, or Early Bronze Age, because this transition has been of interest to me since I first began my archaeological research. If the evidence for contact between Neolithic communities in different regions of Atlantic Europe is circumstantial, that for contact between Bronze Age communities in those same regions is much clearer, not least because it involved the exchange of metal objects themselves.

When Amzai’s newfound companions in southern Britain resolve to set out in search of his distant homeland, they follow a more circuitous route than the one that accidentally brought him to a distant shore; a route that involves them venturing only for a few hours out of sight of land. They have specific reasons for making this voyage: they are both prospecting for metals and seeking out new trading networks. When they arrive, they find that some islanders are more enthusiastic than others about engaging with the strangers and with their unfamiliar technologies, languages and beliefs. The character of Meruskiné, the ‘guardian’ of the island’s ‘Great Shrine’, though herself an enthusiast, expresses the concerns that many of the islanders have:

We have always lived under the same sun as Gwalchmai’s people, but we didn’t know it, and nor did they. From the moment you dragged your boat onto the sands of this island, we have all known it. And knowledge changes everything [...] More boats will come here, and young people from Andis will want to go there [...] there will be great benefits for us here [...] But there will also be great changes, not all of which we will be able to foresee. The trade that will truly change people’s lives is the trade in words, not the trade in objects, but those words are, as yet, unspoken and unthought [...] You who carry those words from one place to another on your

voyages, who explain in one language the words spoken in another, must take care to be the bearers of wisdom and not of folly.

(Patton 2012: 305–307)

Ritual and religious change

Megalithic monuments are the most visible traces of Neolithic communities in the landscapes of Normandy, Brittany and the Channel Islands, and prominent amongst these are the passage graves. In *Undreamed Shores* and *Omphalos*, I imagine their use, but not their construction (one can only pack a limited amount of archaeological/historical detail into a novel—it is only ever part of the setting of a story in which human relationships are centre stage). Some, but not all, of the passage graves in the region have been found to contain human remains, and almost never in large quantities (in contrast to the later gallery graves). It has been a consistent theme of my archaeological publications (Patton 1991b, 1994, 1995) to see them less as collective tombs and more as shrines to the ancestors: places of interaction between the living and the dead; loci of transition from one state of being to another (child to adult, adult to elder, elder to ancestor). The novels provided me with opportunities to imagine this in greater detail than archaeological inference, in its strict sense, permits.

Water dripped onto his shoulder from the crack between the heavy capstones that cover the Shrine of the Gannet Clan. He drank from the bowl that his uncle handed to him, a broth made from the red and white mushrooms that his aunt collected and dried in the autumn [...] He felt he was falling backwards, being pulled back into the belly of the earth. The signs of the ancestors flashed before his eyes: bindweed tendrils, spirals, whirlpools in the air. Gero [...] reached into the depths of one of the stone boxes that lined the wall of the shrine, and produced a skull, handing it to Amzai. “Litura”, he whispered. Amzai held the skull [...] The jaw began to move. The skull hissed, Litura’s cold, stale breath hitting his face, her words forming behind her crumbling teeth.

(Patton 2012: 60)

Although it seems likely that ceremonies in the larger passage graves were presided over by ritual specialists of some sort, we cannot know

whether, in Winkelman's (1992) terms, these were 'shamans', 'priests' or 'witches'; whether they were male or female; or how they were selected. In the novels, I have the smaller passage graves, such as Le Mont Ubé, Jersey, in the care of male and female elders, including Amzai's Uncle Gero, and the more public ceremonies at the larger monuments, such as La Hougue Bie and Barnenez, Finistère, officiated over by women, referred to as 'guardians' in *Undreamed Shores* and as 'sorceresses' in *Omphalos*. This was a pure invention, but a necessary one (there is no place, in a novel, for 'ritual specialists of some sort'—they must have names and defined roles). These ideas are compatible with, but not directly suggested by, the archaeological evidence.

The passage graves of the Channel Islands and north-western France seem to have been systematically sealed and abandoned at some point in the third millennium bc (Patton 1994). In most cases, this involved a physical blockage of the entrance and often, also, a final deposition of human remains and/or objects; sometimes, as at Le Déhus, Guernsey (Patton 1995), copper objects and bell beakers, similar to those found with the 'Amesbury Archer' (Fitzpatrick 2011). This coincides, in the archaeological record, with the appearance of individual burials with grave goods, which I have interpreted (Patton 1994, 1995) as evidence for changing metaphors of death: from death as a changed state of being ([dead] ancestor is to [living] elder as elder is to adult) to death as a journey (the dead have 'passed away', or 'gone to another world').

This transition gives rise to a significant narrative thread in *Undreamed Shores*, and features in a conversation between Amzai and Nanti, when they find a long barrow, which has been blocked up and abandoned. Amzai asks why, and Nanti explains:

people used to go in there to talk to their dead. They wanted the dead to stay here with them, instead of travelling to the other world that Sawel [the Sun God] had prepared for them. Now they have gone, and the people have blocked it to stop their ghosts coming back [...] My father was one of the men who had the wisdom to know that the living had to depend upon each other, and on Sawel, not on the dead.

(Patton 2012: 72)

The structure of Neolithic societies

Both *Undreamed Shores* and *Omphalos* were written against the

background of increasing evidence (Fitzpatrick 2011; Cunliffe & Koch 2012) for the diversity of Neolithic communities and for the mobility of individuals within and between them. Accordingly, in the novels, I present several distinct ethnic groups, each with its own language, customs and traditions: the islanders (including Amzai); the Semona (including the ‘Amesbury Archer’ and his family); the Kritenya (the native people of southern Britain); and the Westlanders (the ‘Boscombe Bowmen’). The islanders are monogamous and matrilineal, the Kritenya polygynous and patrilineal. These details are inventions, with no basis in the archaeological evidence, but such invention is necessary to the process of fictionalisation. The novelist cannot ‘tell’ his or her readers (as the archaeologist or historian typically does) that a community was ‘diverse’; he or she needs to ‘show’ that diversity to the reader as it might be experienced by someone encountering it at the time. These cultural differences, in turn, become the basis of misunderstandings and, sometimes, disputes between individuals and groups. On the one hand, these drive the fictional narrative forward and, on the other, suggest the ways in which the dynamics of past societies might have played out in terms of individual actions and conversations—considerations largely inaccessible to archaeological narrative in its purest form.

“Everything changed when Arthmael came here”, a Kritenya man explains to Amzai. “The way we live our lives, the way we honour the gods, the way we cure the sick, even the way we make sense of death [...] not everyone wanted to be a part of his new world. Not everyone could be a part of it. Arthmael chose those of us he wanted to be part of it. He chose both of us [...] but there were plenty of others he didn’t choose, and what did this new world offer them? A great deal of jealousy, I think, and that’s a bitter leaf to cook with”.

(Patton 2012: 120)

The nature of oral traditions

Every oral tradition in recorded human history has eventually been overtaken and co-opted by a written tradition, but what of those unrecorded oral traditions? For how many centuries, or even millennia, might they have endured, in however altered a form? Four

or five centuries separate the first written version of Homer's *Iliad* from the Mycenaean boar's-tusk helmet accurately described in its tenth book (Fagles 1990: 17–19, 285). Excavations on the Pacific island of Vanuatu (Kirch 2000) have confirmed a 700-year-old oral tradition of a founding ancestor, Roy Mata (see also Elphinstone and Henson, this volume). In *Undreamed Shores* and *Omphalos*, more than 2,000 years separate the 'historical' Txeru from the version of a poem about his exploits that helps to guide Amzai and his companions back to his homeland. Was such narrative longevity ever possible? Lord (1960) suggests that it is limited by contact with literate societies (even the *rhapsodes* of pre-Homeric Greece had at least indirect contact with the literate cultures of the Near East and Egypt). We may never know the answer.

The opening of "The Song of Strangers", the Neolithic story in *Omphalos*, consciously draws on the style of living oral storytellers:

An old woman, white-haired, her cheeks etched like the bark of an oak tree, sits on the ground and begins to tell us of her grandmother's grandmother, the sorceress Egrasté. She passes around a bead that was once Egrasté's. It is circular, no bigger than a fingernail, as light as a ladybird, made from a sliver of a white stone that is not to be found on the island. Far to the south and west of here, she says, in the land between the two seas, a great river widens before it flows into the northern sea. On the top of the hill is a great shrine [...] Egrasté was born in a village close to the shrine and, as she grew up, she showed an uncommon gift for sorcery.

(Patton 2014: 135–36)

More than 2,000 years later, in *Undreamed Shores*, the story of Egrasté and Txeru's journey from the west of Brittany to Jersey has been codified into a poem, using many of the mnemonic rhythms, epithets and formulae documented by Lord (1960) as part of his research with Milman Parry into twentieth-century oral traditions in the former Yugoslavia.

I sing of men who lived before the days
When men piled stone on stone to build a shrine,
Before the marriage of the Earth and Sun,
Before the blackbird learned its lilting song.
Txeru's song I sing, who journeyed far

Beyond the world that his ancestors knew,
To undreamed shores, through waters unexplored. Of how he left
his
island's jagged coasts
With ten companions of his youth and clan
[...] Towards the setting of the sun they rowed,
Each day departing with the ebbing tide,
Until they reached a river's gaping mouth
Beneath the shadow of a stony mound,
A place fresh water might be had, and rest.
Climbing the headland, they approached the mound,
And saw that it was built by human hands,
Of stones piled up on stones piled up on stones.
Into the side of it were caverns wrought,
Eleven caverns built of massive slabs,
Each guarded by a dark-haired sorceress,
[...] But one of these was lovelier than the rest,
Egrasté with her tresses raven-black.
Txeru's hand she took, and led him in.

(Patton 2012: 185–86)

Meruskiné later makes clear to Gwalchmai (Nanti's brother) and Amzai, however, that the version of the story told by men differs from that recounted by women, and that the two versions present the characters and events in fundamentally different lights. Oral tradition, whilst alive as such, is rarely unambiguous; it is only in its absorption into written tradition that it becomes so.

The ending of *Undreamed Shores* consciously appropriates a much later (probably medieval) oral tradition, associated with La Hougue Bie, and first written down in the sixteenth century. In doing so, it raises the question as to whether traditions from prehistory might endure, in much altered forms, into our present time, but it provides no answers: it might, after all, be mere coincidence, and it certainly is, in this instance, pure fiction.

Conclusions

Undreamed Shores and *Omphalos* were conceived as literary projects, and not as contributions to archaeological discourse. They are informed by archaeological evidence, a trait they share with certain other novels set in prehistory (e.g. Golding 1955; Marshall Thomas

1988; Elphinstone 2010). A more explicit dialogue between such fictional works and the archaeological community may prove fruitful, and has, indeed, been initiated, both in the archaeological literature (Elphinstone & Wickham-Jones 2012; Van Dyke & Bernbeck 2015), and in electronic media (<https://kimbiddulph.net/prehistories-podcast>).

The focus of this volume, however, is the possible integration of the techniques of historical fiction into the archaeological research process itself. The novel may not be the most appropriate vehicle for this. Written short stories, oral storytelling and short drama may provide more flexible and immediate possibilities for engagement and dialogue, as well as generate multiple narratives, which may have greater potential for influencing the process of archaeological interpretation (see Gibb, this volume).

The languages of archaeological discourse, and of fiction/storytelling, encapsulate different, but potentially complementary, ways of seeing and understanding the world. Real places (Stonehenge, La Hougue Bie) and real objects (a stone axe, a bead) may form connections between them whilst named characters may constitute a boundary between them. To refer to a skeleton as ‘The Amesbury Archer’ (Fitzpatrick 2011), suggested by the place and circumstances of its discovery, lies within the boundaries of archaeological narrative. But to give him a name—and then to place him within a nexus of relationships with other named characters; to invent his backstory and motivations, to imagine the world through his eyes and to imagine him through the eyes of the other characters—is to step beyond those boundaries.

It follows that archaeologists, particularly those who are directly engaged, at a given moment in time, in the process of archaeological research itself, may not be the people best equipped to operate across these boundaries. If the process of fictionalisation is to be seen as a form of *translation*, who should the translators be? Professional storytellers? Writers in residence? Archaeology students guided by creative writing tutors? Creative writing students guided by archaeologists? Members of a local community, variously guided but with specific experience of activities relating to the research questions thrown up by a particular project (e.g. agriculture, fishing, navigation or carpentry)? Any combination of the above is possible, as are any number of alternatives.

That master of modern storytelling, Italo Calvino (1997: 9), describes, metaphorically, the process of fictionalisation, thus:

In vain [...] shall I attempt to describe Zaira, city of high bastions. I could tell you how many steps make up the streets [...], and what kind of zinc scales cover the roofs; but [...] this would be the same as telling you nothing. The city does not consist of this, but of relationships between the measurement of its space and the events of its past.

Calvino's Zaira is a wholly fictitious city, although its description is given, in his novel, by a historical character (Marco Polo—an unreliable narrator both in Calvino's fictional version and in historical terms). Stonehenge, La Hougue Bie and Durrington Walls, by contrast, are real places, which must have been built, used and inhabited by real people, many aspects of whose lives cannot be directly grasped through archaeological enquiry. The readers of *Undreamed Shores* and *Omphalos* encounter these places and people through the accounts of characters whose narrations may, similarly, be unreliable (Txeru because he is, like Homer's Odysseus, a trickster, who cheerfully tells whatever lie suits his purpose; Amzai because he believes what he is told by other people, who may have their own agendas, and because he may, in any case, misunderstand what is said to him in languages that are not his own).

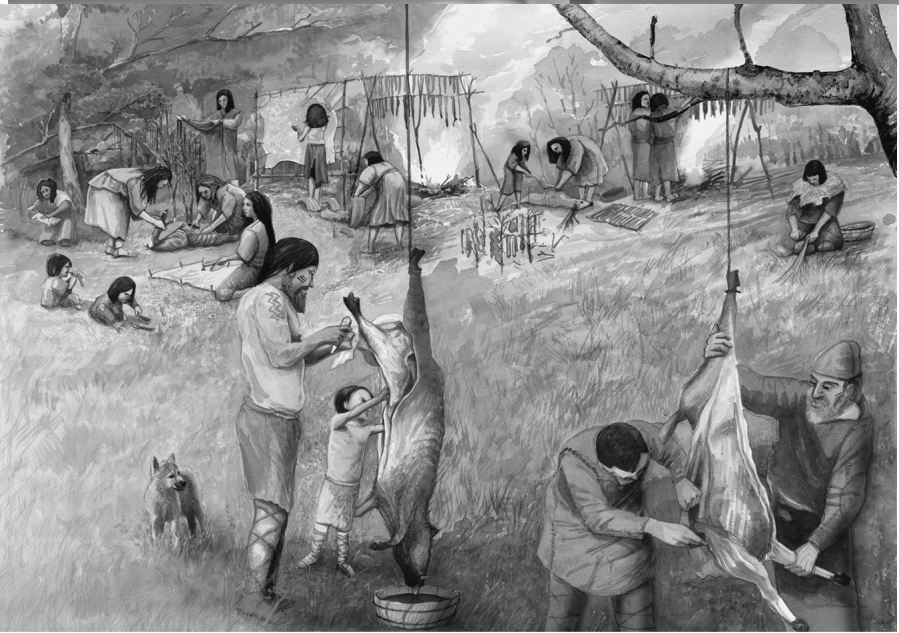
An archaeological account of Calvino's Zaira would, of course, document the steps making up the streets and the nature of the roof coverings, and we need not accept his narrator's assertion that this amounts to telling us nothing. It would tell us much about Zaira, just as an archaeological monograph can tell us much about a site such as La Hougue Bie or Stonehenge, but it is unlikely to tell us everything that we might wish to know. It might be objected by some that whatever is left out of such an account is simply unknowable, however much we might wish otherwise. Here, however, I suggest that the development of fictional narratives (complementary to, and consistent with, the archaeological evidence) may serve as a sort of 'thought experiment' (Horowitz & Massey 1991; Sorenson 1992), shedding light on the possible relationships between the fully tangible and the more elusive dimensions of human activity at a particular time and place in the remote past.

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Kids' Zone

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Club

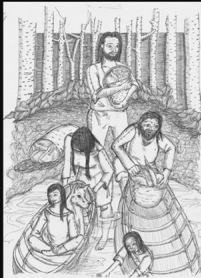
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11,000 YEARS AGO

STORIES FROM THE MIDDLE STONE AGE

Chapter 1. Moving home.

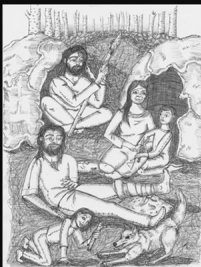
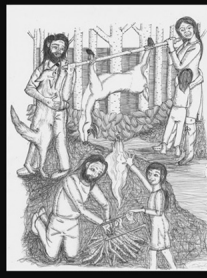
Neska woke first, the morning sunlight coming in through the door of the house. Muli was still fast asleep next to her. On the other side of the hearth, Aila was snoring as usual, while Ama was beginning to stir too.

Neska was excited. The winter snows had melted and the sun was warmer now. Today they would be going inland to the happy place she remembered from last year. Muli would remember too but he wasn't quite so keen on going back. Last year, he had wandered away into the woods and startled a family of wild boar. They had roared and charged at him, making him run back crying to Ama. Neska was looking forward to the different foods she remembered from last time, and the sunlight reflecting on the lake. She thought their home there was the most beautiful place.

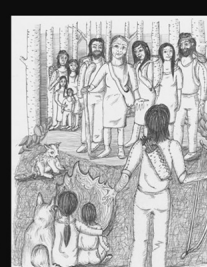
By the time the men were awake, she and Ama had begun packing away the food, tools and clothes into bundles they could carry. Aila and his brother Osaba began to damp down the fire in the hearth, to store the flint nodules in the pit they had dug and take the waste scraps of old bones and the bark from the floor to the dump by the edge of the sea. Muli, as usual, was getting in the way playing with Chakur, the dog.

When all was ready, they set off along the path, away from the coast and into the woods. The spring sun was dappled by the birch leaves as they followed the light grey trunks into the distance. Osaba seemed to know the way, and they walked on going westwards. They walked quietly so as not to disturb the trees nor the animals they glimpsed in the distance. Muli was worried. Everyone was carrying a lot of heavy things and he knew that no one had thought to bring the flint cobble with them as they were just too heavy. He didn't know what they would use for tools when they got to their new home.

After a while, they came out of the trees to the edge of the lake. This was not the place she remembered. They would have to walk all round the edge of the lake to other end of the water. Her feet were tired already and her heart sank at the thought. Aila caught her look and smiled. He always seemed to understand what she was thinking. He walked down through the plants to edge of the lake. There, hidden on the bank, were the two coracles he and Osaba had made last year.



She had forgotten. Of course, they went across the lake in the coracles to the other side. So much quicker and less tiring for her feet. Muli was also happy, splashing his hand in the water as they went along. Ama quietly stopped his arm and gently said 'Now don't disturb the spirit of the lake or she won't



5 Imagined realities in academic and fictional accounts of the British Mesolithic

Introduction

The British Mesolithic lasted for more than 5,000 years, from the adaptation to post-glacial woodland environments around 11,200 bp until the final adoption of a Neolithic way of life around 5800 bp. It is a period rich in meaning and resonance for the present day. It marks the final permanent settlement of Britain after the last ice age and provided the founding population to which all later migrations have added. As a period characterised by a hunter-gatherer lifestyle, it offers a fascinating contrast with modern agricultural and urbanised Britain and provides inspiration for many who are interested in a life more attuned to the environment (Mears 2004; Mears & Hillman 2007; Wickham-Jones 2010).

The Mesolithic was once characterised as a time for which we had only sufficient evidence to see people making microliths, hunting or fishing, with occasional glimpses of other aspects of their lives beyond subsistence, such as the Star Carr antler headdresses. In recent years, however, important archaeological discoveries have transformed our understanding of the period. Interaction with the changing environment, for example, is highlighted by the Storegga Slide tsunami (Dawson et al. 1990) and the reconstruction of the drowned landscape of Doggerland (Gaffney et al. 2009). Views on Mesolithic mobility have been challenged by the excavation of houses at Howick (Waddington 2007), East Barns (Gooder 2007), Star Carr (Taylor et al. 2010), Lunt Meadows (Greaney 2012) and Echline (Robertson et al. 2013). Aspects of religious or spiritual practices may be evidenced at the Blick Mead warm spring feasting site (Jacques et al. 2012) and via votive deposits at Langley's Lane (Davies & Lewis 2005). New forms of Mesolithic burials are now being recognised, such as the cremations at Langford (Gilmour & Loe 2015) and Cheeseman's Green (Pitts 2017). Symbolic behaviours are revealed by enigmatic finds such as the Star Carr pendant (Milner et al. 2016) and the Maerdy carved post (Jones 2013). The Star Carr wooden platform (Milner 2007) and evidence for boat making at Bouldnor Cliff (Momber et al. 2011) have led to a reassessment of the technological abilities of Mesolithic people, and their sophistication has become clearer through the analysis of the Warren Field calendrical pit alignment (Gaffney et al. 2013). Finally,

even individual Mesolithic people have been traced through their footprints, most notably at Goldcliff (Bell 2007). All of this recent work provides extraordinary new detail about aspects of Mesolithic life. We no longer have to content ourselves with assemblages of microliths. We can now begin to write new narratives of Mesolithic life.

Mesolithic archaeology is a vibrant area of research in universities and the focus of regular and increasingly well-attended conferences across Europe. This lengthy period of Britain's past, however, remains marginal to the island story as presented in popular discourse. The Mesolithic is often considered a dull and impoverished period of British archaeology, with a lack of recognisable, monumental sites, rich burials or spectacular finds, barely featuring in museum displays (Figure 5.1), popular media and school education (Milner et al. 2015: 233). It is claimed that "the Mesolithic is arguably still the most neglected period in British prehistory" (Blinkhorn & Milner 2013: 5), and Wickham-Jones (2010: 2–3) notes:

Palaeolithic and Mesolithic Britain [...] are almost invisible to the public eye. Few hunter-gatherer sites are laid out for the public to visit, information on their lifestyle is usually glossed over in popular depictions on television or in the literature, and courses are often only for the initiated. It is almost as if these people never existed.

Figure 5.1 British Museum display of just one case for the 6,000 years of European hunter-gatherers (photograph by Donald Henson)

While there are a few museums where the Mesolithic is displayed well (e.g. Museum of London, Cheddar Gorge Museum, The Rotunda in Scarborough), and the occasional television programme highlighting the period (e.g. two *Time Team* specials and Ray Mears' *Wild Foods*), Wickham-Jones' observation holds true. This marginality of the Mesolithic in the public consciousness formed the rationale for my recent research into the portrayals of the Mesolithic, undertaken as part of PhD research at the University of York. Below, I present a short account of a part of the results.

I take as axiomatic that archaeologists produce stories about the past, based on understandings of the evidence we find. Hodder (1989: 273), Pluciennik (1999: 654) and Tilley (1993: 13) have noted the ability of archaeology to produce temporal sequences with structured relations of dependency in a discourse, clearly a form of narrative. The

archaeologist, historian and philosopher R.G. Collingwood, in 1936, had already identified the key to writing historical (and archaeological) texts as creative re-enactment of past experience by attempting to place oneself in the mind of the past human actor; a kind of creative imagination, albeit one firmly grounded in the evidence (Collingwood 1994: 282–302; see also van Helden & Witcher, this volume). McAdam (1999: 51) praised Woolley's popular account of his excavations at Ur because of his use of the imagination to flesh out the details of his finds, in other words his creation of a narrative. Archaeological texts and fiction share the use of narratives and rhetorical technique, authorial situation and reference to an assumed other world (Evans 1993: 441), the ordering and selection of information, the use of analogy and metaphor, diegesis (an interior view of a world), temporality (the sequence of events), emplotment and explanation (Tilley 1993: 24).

One of the major characteristics of Mesolithic archaeology is the absence of major, extant monuments from the period. This makes it hard to provide a physical focus for popular attention to the period in the way that long barrows, stone circles or hill forts offer for later prehistory. As archaeologists, we focus on material culture and ecofacts. For the Mesolithic, this leaves us predominantly with stone tools, hazelnuts, scarce human remains and environmental evidence. Notwithstanding the impressive recent advances listed above, the archaeological evidence of the Mesolithic is still weighted towards the bottom of Hawkes' (1954) ladder of inference ([Table 5.1](#)). Our understanding of technology and subsistence has long been one of the strengths of Mesolithic archaeology. Likewise, reconstructing the patterns of economic behaviour has always been a major endeavour of archaeology, focusing on seasonal movement and the exchange of raw materials. Our ability to reconstruct social, political and religious behaviours in the Mesolithic is, however, much more limited, relying more heavily on inferences from ethnography. We can now add to this evidence the occasional glimpses of family life or organisation gained from footprints in the tidal mud or from the sizes of houses and settlements. Likewise, for understanding social and 'political' institutions (relating to identity or decision-making), we have to fall back on traditional (and unreliable assumptions about) typological styles as a possible reflection of demographic groups. For religious behaviour, we can add to our assumptions of shamanism (reflected in the rare antler headdresses of Star Carr) the newly found spiritual and symbolic information from recent finds outlined above. We are now

beginning to climb higher up Hawkes’ ladder, but we still have some way to go. If we are to move on from the dominant focus on subsistence and technology, alongside the growing body of new evidence, we also need the use of disciplined imagination to craft new stories and understandings of the Mesolithic.

Table 5.1 The Mesolithic placed on Hawkes’ ladder of inference

Mesolithic evidence in Britain
Spiritual deposits (Culverwell, Langley’s Lane, Blick Mead)
Burials (Aveline’s Hole, Cheddar), human bones in middens, cremation burials (Langford, Cheeseman’s Green), skull (Greylake)
Maerdy decorated wooden post?
Star Carr antler headdresses?
Religious rituals
Antler headdresses as shamanic attire?
Special places (e.g. Blick Mead, Chest of Dee)
Physical differences in lithic artefact styles?
Social differences
Solidiff family footprints, sizes of settlements
Seasonal movement
Procurement and exchange of raw materials (e.g. Portland chert)
Botanical and animal remains (e.g. 49 species at Sand, 44 at Star Carr)
Common middens (Culverwell, Oronsay etc.)
Fishing (e.g. cod, eel, haddock, herring, mackerel, pike, salmon, sturgeon, turbot, wrasse)
Fowling (e.g. shag, cormorant, gannet, grebe, guillemot, merganser, pintail)
Gathering (e.g. bistort, bog bean, crab apple, crowberry, hazelnut, nettle, sorrel, water lily)
Hunting (e.g. aurochs, boar, elk, hare, hedgehog, red deer, roe deer)
Sea mammals (e.g. finwhale, seal)
Shellfish (e.g. cockle, limpet, mussel, oyster, whelk, winkle)
Technology
Being assemblages of microlithic tools, axes/adzes, barbed points (e.g. Stainton)
West 300,000 lithic artefacts)
Rare woodworking, antler and bone (Star Carr, Bouldnor Cliff)
Increasing number of houses (Dee car, Howick, East Barns, Star Carr, Echline, Lunt Meadows)

Analysis of academic narratives of the Mesolithic

The research presented here focuses on a narrative analysis of academic discourse on the Mesolithic in Britain. There is a well-established academic field concerned with narrative (Phelan & Rabinowitz 2005). My definition of narrative comes from Chatman (1978) and Herman (2009). A narrative involves people (characters) doing things (actions), within settings in which things occur (happenings) that affect people’s actions. A classic Mesolithic narrative (Figure 5.2) might therefore be a family of hunter-gatherers (characters) who hunt or gather food (actions) in a local woodland environment (setting), and who have to move to another location with the onset of winter (happening). I have analysed the presentation of

characters, actions, settings and happenings in 65 academic overviews of the Mesolithic published between 1865 and 2009 (Henson 2016: 71–83). I have also examined the narrative presentation of the Mesolithic across a variety of popular media and will focus towards the end of this chapter on fictional narratives as a counterpoint to the academic presentation of the period.

Figure 5.2 Mesolithic folk carrying out activities in a woodland setting (copyright: Forestry Commission Scotland, by Ian Kirkwood Design)

In academic accounts, Mesolithic characters are usually generic. They are very rarely specific individuals with personalities or characteristics, and are often described as groups (people, communities, groups, bands, families). Where more specific terms are used, they are mostly functional (in 70.8 per cent of publications depicting characters). The commonest are those functions that describe different aspects of obtaining food, like hunter-gatherers or fishers. Characters with an individual personality or description are rare (only 10.4 per cent of items). Only very recently have we been able to create an evidence-based image of a Mesolithic person as a tangible human individual (Lotzof 2018).

The main social distinctions found in academic accounts are those of adult or child, male or female. Such a reduction of the idea of character to generalised constructs removes from archaeological narratives one of the main elements of emotionally engaging stories: an empathy between the reader and the people in the Mesolithic. More latterly in archaeology, we have the ideas of individual personhood (Fowler 2004). This includes the idea of a mutable definition of personality and identity, formed by the intimate relationship people have with their social and environmental worlds. This allows for characters to be contextually situated and for a psychological exploration of their identities. This would sit well with an appeal by Mithen (1991) to bring an emotional empathy back to accounts of the Mesolithic and so provide one of the key elements of narrative: the conveying of the human experience of events. Dealing with emotion as part of archaeological understandings of the past is neither easy nor uncontested. Tarlow (2000: 730) observes:

As archaeologists we need to become critically aware of how we represent emotion in the past, to recognize the significance of emotion in writing three-dimensional and humanized pasts.

In his own work, Mithen (2001, 2003) has imaginatively situated himself within Mesolithic landscapes and hunter-gatherer lifestyles as a way of empathising with Mesolithic people. Attempts, however, to provide an imaginative reconstruction of Mesolithic people and their interactions with each other and their world are still uncommon (e.g. Overton 2016). As a result, reconstruction of Mesolithic individuals as characters in academic narrative remains rare.

On the other hand, archaeology is very good at describing and establishing the physical settings of the Mesolithic such as woodland and coastal locations with their particular flora and fauna. We have been innovative in recreating and bringing back to life the long-dead landscapes such as Doggerland (Gaffney et al. 2009). The commonest settings in academic writings since the 1860s are coasts (81.3 per cent of published works that describe settings); lakes (54.2 per cent); woodlands, rivers and caves (33.3–45.8 per cent); and marshes or sandy soils (22.9–27.1 per cent). Very few use settlements or peoples as the locus of action rather than simply descriptions of the natural environment (fewer than 10 per cent). Yet, is accuracy (knowing exactly which plant species were available) the same as providing a meaningful setting for human action? While post-processual approaches to Mesolithic archaeology have begun to appear (Conneller 2000a; Young 2000), the dominant research enterprise remains the establishment of the material details of Mesolithic life. People's interactions with these environments are described as largely physical and economic. Settings are thus written about as a resource to be exploited for food and raw materials, or a landscape that impedes or facilitates travel. Such approaches to physical setting restrict our understanding of the Mesolithic (see Overton 2016). It may be that to develop a 'truthful' Mesolithic narrative, one that reflects the possible human interactions with their world, we have to go beyond the limited facts and towards a more subjective exploration of the Mesolithic world, informed by ethnography and constrained by the evidence.

Academic accounts demonstrate the use of a well-established and long-lasting set of actions to describe Mesolithic life. These are dominated by hunting (71.9 per cent of accounts that depict actions) and making tools (61.4 per cent). Less common but widespread are fishing (49.1 per cent); migrating (42.1 per cent); using dogs, making houses and decorating (33.3 per cent each); eating (31.6 per cent); gathering plants (28.1 per cent); knapping flint or burying the dead (24.6 per cent each); moving around the landscape (22.8 per cent);

and preparing food (21.1 per cent). The commonest categories of actions are therefore the acquisition of food, the making of tools and movement. These relate to the technological basis for Mesolithic life and economic/subsistence activities. While the precise forms of these actions will be culturally determined by the social practices of each community, it is the results of these actions that are visible in the archaeological record. It is the latter that leads most academic accounts to a focus on the technological or physical interactions with the natural environment, rather than their social, cultural or interpersonal contexts. The activities are depicted as largely male-oriented (following prevalent stereotypes), reflecting the bias towards men in the characters represented in the wider narratives. Males are specifically identified in 33.3 per cent of the accounts analysed, compared with women in only 20.8 per cent. This situation has been criticised as the 'boys and arrows' narrative (Finlay 2000). It is also belied by ethnographic observations of food gathering in hunter-gatherer societies that note the important, even dominant, role in many environments of women in the provision of most of the day-to-day food consumed by the community (Hunn 1981).

As for happenings featured in accounts, these are mostly generic environmental events and seldom demographic or cultural. The earliest to be identified, starting in the 1870s, is seasonality, with climatic warming featuring from the 1910s and forestation from the 1920s. The submergence of Doggerland has featured since the 1990s and the Storegga tsunami since the 2000s. Overall, in academic writing the dominant happenings are changing climate (65.8 per cent of accounts), the arrival of new fauna or flora (52.6 per cent), the melting of ice and the growth of forests (50 per cent each). Changing sea or land levels, and Britain's isolation from the continent are also common (31.6–34.2 per cent). Among non-environmental happenings, the only common one is contact or interaction with incoming or nearby Neolithic people (39.5 per cent).

The presentation of characters in settings performing actions and affected by happenings is part of the mimetic aspect of narrative as outlined by Phelan and Rabinowitz (2012: 7). This allows readers to involve themselves in a believable world and to empathise with characters or situations. Phelan and Rabinowitz also describe a thematic aspect of narrative, which concerns the underlying themes illustrated by the story. Audience response to these depends on how far the ideas presented reflect their own cultural, philosophical or ethical stances in the world of today. The presentation of themes that

resonate with readers is seen in the early academic accounts mostly describing Mesolithic people as primitive, wild savages, passively subject to the constraints imposed by Nature and even degenerate when compared with their more artistic Palaeolithic precursors. This reflects Thomas Hobbes' vision of prehistoric life as nasty, brutish and short, a widespread perception in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries of prehistoric people. Readers would have been guided by the prevailing imperialist and colonialist assumptions about 'natives' embedded in the political and popular consciousness of that time. From the 1940s, Jean-Jacques Rousseau's alternative vision of the 'noble savage' replaced earlier perceptions. This more progressive view was one of affluent, inventive, skilled achievers, which continues into the present (and better reflects the most recent archaeological evidence). The appeal of the 'noble savage' to later twentieth-century readers is perhaps best exemplified by Tilley (1996: 68):

I am politically old-fashioned enough even to want to describe [late Mesolithic southern Scandinavia] as a kind of Garden of Eden before the fall. These were a series of communities in which ownership of land and resources was common or collective, sharing was generalized and no one is likely to have gone hungry.

To summarise, academic accounts of the Mesolithic demonstrate a number of narrative elements, but many are undeveloped and their range is restricted. What academic archaeology does well is to describe physical settings and happenings. It is less effective at presenting the social or psychological world of Mesolithic individuals. The reason for this is illustrated by the founding father of British Mesolithic studies, Sir Grahame Clark. His later descriptions of the Mesolithic were highly functional: how resources were used within environmental, technological and demographic constraints—a cultural ecology of the Mesolithic (Clark 1972). This is still the default setting for much of Mesolithic archaeology. Since 2000, however, we have begun to develop a more exciting understanding of setting with people enmeshed in physical, psychological and social networks, as shown by the work of Conneller (2000b), Cummings (2000), Finlay (2006), Milner (2006), Warren (2006) and others. It has been noted that this is part of a breaking down of a Cartesian dualism that restricts our thinking about the Mesolithic (Brittain & Overton 2013; Overton & Hamilakis 2013; Overton 2016). But this still has a long way to go, and the legacy of Clark yet looms large over our academic

The necessity of fiction

The fictional accounts of the Mesolithic found in novels and short stories offer a great contrast in narrative style and content to those featured in academic accounts. Different media are designed to engage different audiences. The readership of fiction will be largely, though not entirely, distinct to that for academic works. I would argue that for a twenty-first-century (largely urban) audience, the academic descriptions of the Mesolithic provide characters that are largely undifferentiated, who live in strange settings and carry out unfamiliar technological actions or who have mental relationships with the natural world very different from our own. It is hard therefore for public audiences to empathise with Mesolithic people and hence difficult to understand the experience of Mesolithic life. Academic accounts do not offer an engaging narrative for the public.

This is where fiction comes in. The idea of the psychologically complex dividual person is most fully realised in fictional writings situated in the Mesolithic. Fiction is good at describing the characters and actions needed for more rounded narratives. Indeed, Deetz (1998) has suggested well-researched fiction can be as good as any site report. So, what does the Mesolithic offer the novelist? The Mesolithic serves as an ‘other’ world which allows the exploration of ideas and issues. This makes it similar to fantasy fiction, but set within a (usually) well-researched world and the established limits of the archaeological evidence (Gale 2002: 2).

One good example of this is the work of novelist Margaret Elphinstone. Rather than simply plundering archaeological reports for narrative material, Elphinstone met with archaeologist Caroline Wickham-Jones over a period of three years to explore the Mesolithic and together imagine how it might have been. She also drew on her own ethnographic experiences among the Inuit and Ojibwa (Elphinstone & Wickham-Jones 2012: 532–33) and the Saami, and other indigenous groups in Mongolia, Australia and South Africa (Elphinstone 2009: 372). Elphinstone clearly found resonance between her own literary writing and the work of archaeologists, both being imaginative reconstructions of other worlds. Notably, the subjective, phenomenological approaches of recent archaeology were less useful to her than more traditional presentations of the evidence from the period. The resulting work provides an imaginative engagement with

the archaeological evidence. Such an imaginative retelling of the Mesolithic involves the storyteller in a rhetorical act, hoping to affect the reader and draw them into an empathetic understanding of the Mesolithic world. How this should work is highlighted by Phelan and Rabinowitz (2012), who identify three elements of narrative that engage an audience. The mimetic element involves the creation of believable, realistic story-worlds. Mesolithic archaeology is very good at this with its detailed understanding of the prehistoric environment and climate. The synthetic element provides the reader with their aesthetic appreciation of that world. The Mesolithic has an ‘otherness’ that can evoke curiosity, mystery and a sensory engagement different to the world we inhabit today. The thematic element delivers the resonances of the story for the audience by making links with concerns or experiences they have in the present. The Mesolithic acts as a counterpoint for our own relationship with the natural environment and of the importance of community and social relationships different to those of today. For example, Elphinstone and Wickham-Jones (2012: 535)

contend that archaeologists need to develop skills beyond the analysis of data and be prepared to use that data as a stimulus for the imagination. In the words of novelist Margaret Elphinstone: “In the blank spaces between the words of archaeological narrative lie the buried kernels of all the forgotten stories”.

If archaeologists have been timid to date about going beyond descriptions of the data collected in excavation or field survey, we can now see the beginnings of good Mesolithic stories being created or used by archaeologists. A few have used fictional elements in their academic accounts of the British Mesolithic: Bill Finlayson (2005) in *Wild harvesters*; John Hearle (2011) in *Mellor through the ages* and Penny Spikins (2002) in *Prehistoric people of the Pennines*. Finlayson (2005: 17), for example, introduces a chapter on mobility in the Mesolithic thus:

The canoe moved into the bay. The boy sitting at the prow could see that already a large number of other boats were drawn up on the beach, and that camp fires had been lit. He looked back to his sister, who had finally fallen asleep. This would be the first time she had seen so many people in one place. He hoped that this year he would be allowed to go off with the men to fish, while the

living. There is, however, a profound imbalance in gender representations that reflects the dominant academic 'boys and arrows' view of the period. Of all the named characters, 65 per cent are male and 35 per cent are female. None of the works has a majority of females, with the percentage of males varying from 54 to 75 per cent. This is notably similar to the gender imbalance in pictorial illustrations of the Mesolithic (64 per cent male and 36 per cent female, among characters whose gender could be determined).

The settings for stories about the Mesolithic in fiction are, unsurprisingly, mostly like those described by archaeologists (this may not be the case in other fiction genres such as fantasy or science fiction). These are often augmented, however, as places of significance or have a direct role to play in events. Mountains, for example, may be barriers or gateways to a new world (Howarth 1996), or places of spiritual and dangerous power (Paver's *Chronicles of Ancient Darkness* series). As well as the physical world, the spirit world is used in most of the works as a setting of danger and unpredictability. This allows for the intrusion of fantasy or horror elements into stories and adds drama. All the works are rich in social settings of the family, clan and intergroup relations.

Actions depicted in fiction are numerous. These include those we expect to find on the basis of the archaeology: hunting, the making and using of technology, and mobility. They also include more illustrative and detailed actions relating to everyday life from birth to death. These provide a rich background texture that enables the deictic shift of the reader from the present into the story world. That world is made more real by the accumulation of realistic details about the way of life. This adds to the power of the fiction for some readers:

I think Michelle Paver's excellent writing and descriptions of setting make these books really stand out. It definitely made me more interested in European prehistory, primeval forests, and the way of life for Stone Age people.

(Andrea on *Wolf Brother*, GoodReads 29 July 2014)

Not all readers, however, are interested in such depictions of the Mesolithic. The details of daily life can detract from the drama:

I wouldn't recommend, unless you are really interested in how to hunt certain animals or make a good winter camp.

(Jade on *The Gathering Night*, GoodReads 13 July 2014)

The diegetic actions by the characters that move the plot along are less directly Mesolithic, more to do with personal relationships of love, hate or dominance, for example. It is the social and spiritual settings that allow the inclusion of these personal relationships: the fundamental building blocks of fiction.

The happenings depicted in fiction are the same as generic happenings arising out of the archaeology, such as sea-level rise in *Stone Spring* (Baxter 2011), a tsunami in *The Gathering Night* (Elphinstone 2009), the arrival of Neolithic people in one of *The Whitestone Stories* (Barrett 2007). There are, however, also more specific initiators of dramatic action and plot, which are seldom revealed by archaeological investigation of the Mesolithic in Britain. These include sickness, starvation, forest fire and attack by animals.

The elements of narrative outlined above form the mimetic element of Mesolithic fiction. The synthetic otherness of the Mesolithic derives partly from the hunter-gatherer lifestyle that so dominates academic accounts and that is so very different to our own. Fiction writers are very good at exploiting this sense of otherness, yet enabling us to inhabit this world through the eyes of believable individuals with whom we can empathise. The settings of the wild woodlands and the actions of daily life are described in sensory terms that help transport us from our modern urban environment. But the remoteness of the happenings is lessened by the inclusion of detail, such as the real-life consequences of the tsunami that devastated coastal communities in *The Gathering Night*.

Above all, Mesolithic fiction has thematic resonance that allows us to explore the value we place on Mesolithic life and how we see that life in relation to the modern world. This can be seen in the reactions of various readers of fiction, as revealed by book reviews on the GoodReads website, for example:

I particularly admire her abandonment of an optimistic and ultimately feminist tendency to create an egalitarian Eutopia [sic] in which both genders existed in equality within prehistory.

(Emily on *The Gathering Night*, GoodReads 3 January 2014)

As my 15-year-old daughter (a reader of this series since it began) said after reading this most recent instalment, you REALLY don't want to have lived 5000 years ago.

(Eva on Michelle Paver's *Oath Breaker*, GoodReads 24 November 2009)

One of the more nuanced verdicts on the significance of the Mesolithic period is offered by Wickham-Jones (2010). Her overall viewpoint is that the Mesolithic way of life has a great deal to teach us about the modern world and about some of our current problems. Yet, while she states that past hunter-gatherers had a way of life that was “based on a sophisticated knowledge of the land, and a detailed understanding of the way the world worked” (Wickham-Jones 2010: 11), she is also careful to qualify this by saying that “the view that Mesolithic Britain was the last truly sustainable age is patently not true”—Mesolithic people were “not happy hippies living in harmony with their environment” (ibid., 20). In reaching this conclusion, she echoes Finlayson (2005: 61), who observes that we should “not be fooled by ideas of a people living in a hazy dream time at one with nature”. Wickham-Jones and Finlayson seem to have been reacting not only to Tilley (quoted above) but also to the fact that most academic accounts since the 1970s have presented a largely positive picture of the Mesolithic (Henson 2016: 73–74). Mesolithic people have become pioneers, exploring and settling a new land, living in a more intimate relationship with their environment than we do today, removed as we are by industrialised farming, urbanisation and globalisation (Henson 2016: 83). It seems that novelists have perhaps taken a more nuanced view than academics.

Finally, what novelists offer us is a perspective on our own practice as archaeologists. Wickham-Jones has noted that working with a novelist stimulated her to ask new questions of the Mesolithic and to think about what life at the time was actually like. As a result, she became more aware of the weaknesses in her theoretical approaches and interpretations of the period (Elphinstone & Wickham-Jones 2012: 536). The same perspective forms an important subplot within Lesley Howarth’s novel *The Pits*. What we write often says more about archaeologists than about the periods we study.

Any way you look at it, this story’s got to rile Nerdcliff. I hope it sticks in his throat ’til he coughs up a whole bunch of his phlegmy old theories and finally sees they say more about him than prehistory.

(Brod in *The Pits* commenting on archaeologist Prof. Needcliff
[Howarth 1996: 205])

Conclusions

Rather than endlessly reporting on the material finds of our excavations, archaeologists need to tell stories—and we need the help of professional storytellers to show us how this can be done more effectively. We need a better understanding of what makes a narrative account: the place of characters performing actions in believable settings and whose lives are affected by various happenings. We also need to understand that a satisfying narrative moves beyond mimesis or even the aesthetic appeal of the narrative medium and involves a thematic resonance with our own backgrounds, experiences and beliefs. Our stories should be about the life of Mesolithic people: the characters in our narrative. We can provide a mimetic story world through our evidence, but we need to use our imaginations backed by reasonable inference from ethnography to provide the actions of everyday life that make that life meaningful in all its social and spiritual richness. The latest archaeological finds can help us do this: move beyond subsistence to appreciate a fuller Mesolithic experience.

This is a matter of some importance. It is not only because it will help make our work more visible and better known among the public, but because the Mesolithic has an otherness that sheds light on some of the concerns we have about the present. The thematic resonance of the period has barely been explored, and yet needs to be examined more urgently than ever. It was Clark (1943) who pointed out the necessity of using our knowledge of prehistory as an instrumental force for good. Clark highlighted the ability of archaeology (described by him as anthropology and prehistory) to develop an understanding of common humanity and to put right many of the ills that were plaguing the modern world. The specific context of his advocacy may have been during the Second World War, yet his words still have potency today:

What is needed above all is an overriding sense of human solidarity such as can come only from consciousness of common origins. Divided we fall victims to tribal leaders: united we may yet move forward to a life of elementary decency.

(Clark 1943: 113)

He especially advocated the role of archaeology, and prehistory in particular, in overcoming two evils of the modern world: national allegiances and cramped human living space. Archaeology can give to education an understanding of “the biological unity and the cultural inheritance of mankind” (Clark 1943: 115).

The Mesolithic world of hunter-gatherers is one very different from our own. It offers a contrast in which we can see people following a different and yet successful way of life for well over 5,000 years. The Mesolithic covers the same length of time as from the initial construction at Stonehenge until the present. Its people were both among our own ancestors and yet genetically different from us. We can now see them as dark skinned, brown haired and blue eyed (Lotzof 2018). The image we now have of Cheddar Man arguably emphasises our similarity and difference, allowing a common humanity to underlie our appreciation of Mesolithic interactions with the environment, spiritual beliefs and symbolic behaviours. Rather than simply an interlude or step towards the Neolithic, the Mesolithic period offers us people with whom we can empathise and a valid, alternative way of life.

The Mesolithic can be the source for potent stories of human life, if only we can learn how to craft better narratives. My own small steps in creating such stories have been to build a resource for schools using the evidence of the Mesolithic at Star Carr, now available at www.starcarr.com/schools.html. Short stories (more like vignettes) about the life of a family 11,000 years ago are used as the basis for the teaching of wider themes (Figure 5.4). Among these are six lessons for the present.

Figure 5.4 The family of Mutil and Neska as a basis for short stories for schools on the Star Carr website, www.starcarr.com/schools.html (text by Donald Henson, images by Robyn Croft)

The first is that ‘Change is inevitable’. This focuses on the inevitability of climate change (affecting sea levels, environment and patterns of settlement) and how people have to respond and cope with it. The wider lesson is that ways of life and culture never stay the same. The Star Carr families eventually had to move elsewhere. The ‘Living environment’ is a lesson about how Mesolithic hunter-gatherers had a close relationship with their environment, based on a deep knowledge of plants, animals and weather. They saw it as alive, animated by spirits, and they gave it respect in return for taking from it what they needed. Yet, it was an environment that could be yearly and seasonally unpredictable and contained many dangers. A sustainable life is one that respects the environment and lives with it, not against it.

‘Healthy eating’ is a lesson based on the Mesolithic diet that was very varied and was based on local, seasonal and fresh foods. It

contrasts with our modern diet and offers lessons in how to eat more healthily with a well-balanced and nutritious range of foods. The lesson about ‘What makes us happy’, things or people, is based on the fact that Mesolithic people had far fewer possessions than we do today, but would have had rich social lives centred on their family and clan. This lesson makes us think about what is really important and makes us happy in the modern consumerist world. Having a lot of material things is not essential. Instead, what is important is to be valued by family and friends and know that you are contributing to their happiness in return.

In ‘The origins of ourselves’, we can understand that the people of the Mesolithic were the founding settlers of today’s Britain. However, this initial stock of people has been added to over the last 6,000 years by repeated waves of immigrants bringing new ways of life and new cultures to enrich our island people and our story. This is now being backed up not only by historical evidence but also by ancient DNA. The final lesson is ‘Humans can be different’, based on the observation that, though the Mesolithic way of life was very different to our own, it was nonetheless successful, lasting for more than 5,000 years. To study it shows that other ways of life and culture than ours should be respected. There is more than one way of being human and all should be cherished.

I hope that these resources can make a small contribution to bringing an archaeological understanding of the human condition into our perceptions of the modern world. Hopefully, we can begin to remedy the complaint of Silberman:

At a time when culture, fundamentalism, climate change, and economic inequality are convulsing the world, archaeology promises profundity but delivers only mountains of (mostly unpublished) facts.

(2008: 175)

There is much more to the study and understanding of the Mesolithic than wondering how often these prehistoric people moved settlements, whether they actually ate limpets or whether they made their microliths with leading-edge retouch!

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6Walking in someone else's shoes

Archaeology, empathy and fiction

Daniël van Helden and Robert Witcher

Introduction

We live in troubled times. Growing social and economic inequality has fostered political polarisation and a resurgence of nationalism; identities are increasingly entrenched and contested; and urgent global crises such as climate change are kicked down road as problems for future generations. Understanding, of other people's perspectives, it seems, is in short supply. In this context, it is unsurprising that empathy (or the 'empathy deficit', Krznaric 2014: xix) should have become such a hot topic. Over the past 20 years, politicians, religious leaders, lifestyle coaches and cultural influencers have regularly identified the need for greater societal empathy (de Waal 2009; Rifkin 2010). Academic research on the subject, in the humanities, social sciences and sciences, has also boomed during this period. Writers of fiction, however, have long been alert to the importance of empathy. Novels centred around heroes (or anti-heroes) with whom the reader has little or no empathy are few and far between. This is no less true for historical fiction, from Jean Auel's (1980) *The Clan of the Cave Bear* to Scott O'Dell's (1960) *Island of the Blue Dolphins*. Archaeologists also have turned their attention to empathy, but the subject has not stimulated the same level of interest and research as found in cognate disciplines such as anthropology, history and classics. In this chapter, we examine some of the recent research on empathy, focusing on issues of definition, ethics and epistemology, and assess the current and potential uses of empathy in archaeology, with a particular focus on the role of fictive techniques.

In popular understanding, archaeologists deal with things not thoughts. Even within the discipline, many archaeologists would argue that emotions and cognitive processes such as empathy are not only beyond our reach but also outwith our remit (see Introduction, this volume). Yet, in characterising post-processual archaeology, Matthew Johnson (1999: 104) suggests that "all archaeologists actually practise

empathetic thinking whether they admit it or not". Whether this is true or otherwise, there has been a remarkable dearth of disciplinary discussion or analysis of this topic. Certainly mention of empathy can be found in the recent archaeological literature and, sometimes, in a positive light. More often, however, the subject is quickly discounted as either too complex to define or work with, impossible to achieve or simply undesirable as either a means or an ends. In this chapter, we take Johnson's statement as a starting point for an exploration of how empathy is used in archaeology, how it might be more explicitly acknowledged and how its use might be advanced. We argue that if archaeologists are already using empathy, then this should be done consciously and integrated explicitly into the research process.

In marked contrast to the situation within the discipline of archaeology, the role of empathy in historical fiction is almost universally recognised as fundamental for engaging the audience through the creation of characters with whom the reader can identify and about whom they care (see both Elphinstone and Henson, this volume). Given the broader overlaps and synergies between archaeology and historical fiction demonstrated elsewhere in this volume, we suggest that it is worth exploring fictive techniques as one way in which archaeologists might address empathy more directly.

Archaeology and empathy: examples

Over the last two decades, research into empathy by philosophers and psychologists has boomed (Keen 2006). This interest is in no small part due to functional magnetic resonance imaging and other neuroscientific techniques that have breathed new life into questions and debates long thought to be irresolvable (e.g. Biggs 2007; Iacoboni 2008; Griffiths 2013). In this chapter, however, we deliberately omit these neuroscientific developments and focus instead on some of the research that has emerged in the context of the broader societal shifts outlined in the introduction above. We begin, however, by reviewing some examples of empathy in the archaeological literature to establish its usage and the disciplinary concerns about it.

A particular cluster of research that makes explicit its empathetic intent can be found in the context of North American historical archaeology. Originating in the 1990s with work, for example, by Yentsch (1992: 308), there has been sustained interest in the use of empathy among this particular archaeological community (e.g. Chan 2007: 175–77; Trigger 2006: 476 notes the significant role of

historical archaeology as “testing ground” for post-processual ideas). This concentration of interest may be explained by the unique combination of an abundant material record, combined with excellent documentary sources, and a political alertness to the underrepresentation of particular voices (e.g. women and slaves) and the continuity of these inequalities into the present (see also Gibb, this volume). Another research focus of relevance concerns how people experienced the world in the past, focusing on phenomenology, performance, being-in-the-world and dwelling (see Thomas 2016). Most of this work steers clear of empathy (e.g. Thomas 1993: 29, 2012: 226; Tilley 2008: 264, though see Harris & Sørensen 2010), but the broader notion of using the archaeologist’s body and experiences as proxies for those of past people, echoes the issues at hand (see also complementary digital analysis, e.g. Eve 2014). Similarly, the use of fictive techniques to describe imagined journeys (see Introduction, this volume), seeks overtly to put the reader into the shoes of past people. Finally, more explicit consideration of empathy can be found in relation to early human evolution and cognition (e.g. Spikins 2009; Barrett 2013) and, increasingly, in the context of bioarchaeology and public engagement (Boutin 2019). Some, though certainly not all, of these archaeological engagements with empathy have also made use of fictive techniques to enable or enhance understanding of past people (for a range of examples, see Introduction, this volume).

A number of archaeologists have argued explicitly against the use of empathy. From a cognitive-processual perspective, Renfrew (1994: 6) expresses scepticism about the “effort of active empathy [and the] privileged status which must inevitably be claimed by the idealist who is advancing an interpretation on the basis of this intuitive ‘I-was-there’ experience”. This position is broadly followed by others, such as Mayne and Murray (2001: 4), who aim to access the perspective of the inhabitants of historical urban “slumlands”, but who caution against the “pretence of empathy” to this end (see also Tarlow 2000a, discussed below). Others have dismissed empathy on the basis that it transgresses the line between objective and subjective, and between fact and fiction (see examples in the Introduction, this volume).

A particular challenge with the use of empathy in archaeological research, however, is that there is little agreement about exactly what it is, and therefore when and how it is being used. If we proceed from the statement that all archaeologists engage in empathetic thinking (Johnson 1999: 104, above), then very few accounts explicitly acknowledge it. In this scenario, most empathetic thinking therefore

either would be unrecognised or actively denied after the event through omission from written accounts. In seeking to understand the archaeological record, however, archaeologists regularly put themselves in the minds or bodies of past people. Examining the purpose of hill forts and the levels of violence in the British Iron Age, for example, archaeologists effectively have worked through the thought processes and physical actions of those attacking and defending these sites (see Armit 2007 for overview, cf. Breeze 2006: 74–82 for a similar approach to Hadrian's Wall). Such thinking has been developed into a more explicit methodology by some historical and battlefield archaeologists. Drawing on modern military principles, intended to guide a commander's decision-making, archaeologists have surveyed landscapes to identify the possible locations of historical military action (see Geier et al. 2014). In effect, the archaeologist takes up residence in the mind of the historical military commander and steps through the thoughts, decisions and actions in order to re-enact a battle, discern its logic and interpret its material correlates. Although such approaches advance a clear methodology, they do not define themselves explicitly as a form of 'embodied empathy'. Moreover, such approaches come with risk, most obviously, the dangers of anachronism (Bernbeck 2015, see below) and of inadvertently occupying one pair of shoes to the detriment of others (e.g. visitors to Hadrian's Wall are culturally preconditioned and physically directed to assume the role of male Roman soldiers rather than female civilians or local populations, Witcher 2010).

In summary, explicit discussion of empathy can be found in a limited range of archaeological research, where it is invoked for varied purposes and approached in different ways. There is, however, a wider spread of publications that make use of closely related approaches or which make implicit use of empathetic thinking. The latter, in particular, should encourage us to attend more directly to this subject, for unless its use is acknowledged and explored, there is risk of misunderstanding, error or even unintentional harm. We contend that an engagement with fiction can serve as a way to address empathetic thinking more explicitly. The following sections focus on establishing broad definitions of empathy and the issues raised, drawing on general literature. We then return later in the chapter to a more specific focus on empathy in archaeology.

Definitions

Given that empathy is generally perceived to be a desirable cognitive capacity, and its absence a source of concern, there is remarkably little consensus regarding its definition. Extensive discussion, in both the general and the discipline-specific literature, is dedicated to how empathy can and should be defined (see Stueber 2006, 2013; Coplan & Goldie 2011a; Cuff et al. 2014). The resulting babel of competing ideas is now almost irresolvable, and many contributors to these debates have abandoned efforts to establish shared definitions, settling instead for multiple and expedient versions in order to move beyond the impasse (see contributions to Coplan & Goldie 2011b). There is, however, general agreement around the differentiation of two broad categories of empathy: lower (affective) and higher (cognitive). The former encompasses people's immediate, non-reflexive, affective reactions when confronted with others' emotions; the latter comprises conscious and deliberate cognitive attempts to experience and understand others' emotional situations by simulating their experience in oneself or as one's own. Even here, however, not all scholars agree as some restrict the concept of empathy exclusively to the higher level or cognitive form (e.g. Coplan 2011; Matravers 2011).

A specific point of definitional disagreement concerns the relationship between empathy and sympathy. Is the latter related but distinct, integral or even synonymous? Some scholars define sympathy separately as "caring about someone else" (Coplan 2011: 4), while others see it as an inherent part of empathy (e.g. Hoffman 2000: 29–62, 2011: 234). Archaeologists can have great sympathy for people of the past and be motivated by it. Studies of victims of the Irish Great Famine (Geber 2015) or of slaves at Roman Pompeii (George 2007), for example, can communicate human suffering and evoke emotional responses including sympathy. These accounts can also move explicitly into the use of fiction (e.g. Boutin 2016). An important question, however, concerns whether and how such sympathy relates to empathy.

A third issue around which definitions vary is whether empathy concerns 'self-oriented perspective taking' or 'other-oriented perspective taking'. In the former case, the subject imagines how he or she would feel in the target's situation; in the second case, the empathiser tries to simulate what the target feels in their situation. For many scholars, it is this other-oriented perspective taking that defines empathy (Coplan 2011; cf. Smith 2011) and which, hypothetically, would be best suited for the study of the past (see Collingwood 1951; cf. Retz 2015; Stueber 2002, 2006). Critics,

however, argue that this form of empathy is rare (Matravers 2011), if not impossible to achieve (Goldie 2011). If correct, we would be left with the more limited potential of self-oriented perspective taking and the associated risk of mistaking this form of empathy for other-oriented perspective taking, which can lead to misrepresentation and worse (Coplan 2011: 11–13; this is the same basic objection of some archaeologists to the use of empathy and fiction, see below). While critical of self-oriented perspective taking, however, philosopher Amy Coplan recognises that it can act as a precursor to other-oriented perspective taking. Drawing on the work of Hans-Georg Gadamer, below, we argue for a judicious juxtaposition of self- and other-oriented perspective taking in order to advance understanding of the past.

The lack of consensus around basic definitions of the concept make it difficult to evaluate the evidence for empathy and its effects generally, and within the archaeological literature specifically. Each definition is supported by different forms of *a priori* reasoning and empirical evidence (Cuff et al. 2014), and the evaluation of any particular claim about empathy is therefore largely dependent on each author's definition. These issues may partially explain why relatively little has been written about empathy in archaeology when, at the same time, it is suggested to be pervasive in, even inherent to, archaeological thinking.

For our current purpose, we intentionally avoid the stricter definitions that limit the concept to purely higher-level cognitive empathy, and follow psychologist Martin Hoffman (2000: 4) in focusing on “an affective response more appropriate to another's situation than one's own”. While we are primarily interested in higher-level empathy, we also recognise Hoffman's (2000: 29–62) observation that the lower end of the empathy spectrum can function as a precursor or a trigger for higher-level empathy, and it therefore makes sense to adopt a broad definition that includes it (though see Masto 2015 for the opposite conclusion). Hoffman's (2011: 231) definition does not require an exact match between the empathiser and the target, and we take a similarity in cognitive process to be the criterion for empathy, with empathic accuracy (Ickes 1997) providing a gauge to judge the merits of the resulting claims. We also distinguish between empathy and sympathy on the basis that good empathisers—those who can read others well—need not always use that insight to act in the interests of their target. A Machiavellian personality may have empathetic skills but be unable or unwilling to demonstrate

sympathy towards others (pace Hoffman 2000: 35–36).

Our definition contrasts with the position of archaeologists Harris and Sørensen (2010: 151), who explore similar issues, but who overtly avoid empathy. Yet, their definition of *attunement*, “how people notice, observe, perceive and recognize moods and emotions in themselves and others”, is what we would characterise as lower-level empathy. One reason that they may be reticent to get inside the heads of past people is to avoid the charge of “naïve” empathy (Tarlow 2000a: 723, see below), though we would point to Hoffman’s argument that lower-level empathy (*attunement*) can function as a precursor to higher-level empathy. In addition, it may be that the specific Neolithic archaeological evidence with which Harris and Sørensen work is thought unsuitable for the exploration of empathy. We must remain mindful of the limitations of the evidence, but it need not follow that all empathy with past people is impossible.

Ethical and epistemological debates

The recent upsurge of general interest in empathy concentrates on its beneficial effects both for individuals and society. Its advocates argue that it is the ‘glue’ that bonds communities; its absence leads to misunderstanding and conflict. Diametrically opposed to this favourable evaluation, however, are voices particularly from anthropology and postcolonial studies who question the ethical acceptability of empathy. Specifically they hold that, because the experience of the ‘Other’ is so radically different to that of the empathiser, it is impossible for the latter to gain any meaningful understanding. At best, it is argued, such attempts distract the empathiser from complicity in a colonial system that continues to oppress and exploit the object of their empathy; at worst, they form part of an intentional colonial venture to appropriate the (experience of) the Other (Spivak 1988; Trigger 2006: 474; Bernbeck 2015).

These two broadly positive and negative ethical evaluations are also found in relation to the role of empathy in (historical) fiction. Here, research has examined not only how readers are able to empathise with literary characters, but also the potential value of fiction for the cultivation of wider empathetic capacity (for a range of positions, see Feagin 1996; Hakemulder 2000; Keen 2007; Bruun Vaage 2009; Gottschall 2012). Conversely, critics have argued that such literary empathy merely offers the (usually white middle-class Western) reader a sense of comfort and control (e.g. Wood 2002: 36;

generally, Said 1993). In this context, for example, Stephanie Moser (2016: 40) questions why some archaeological cultures and periods are subject to greater exploitation than others.

While some of these ethical objections to the use of empathy reflect valid concern about real and structural inequalities in the contemporary world, here we take the position that to give up completely on empathy would be a counsel of despair. If all empathetic attempts are understood as acts of imposition or appropriation, then any effort to take interest in or understand others—whether a spouse or child, a friend or the victim of a distant war—becomes a potentially exploitative enterprise. Empathy cannot be taken as an unalloyed and entirely positive force. When, for example, a simplistic societal view of empathy leads to the expectation (or demand) of one particular and universal emotional reaction, empathy can lead to misunderstanding (e.g. Özyürek 2018). Yet, to reject empathy outright risks losing sight of a shared humanity—and at a moment of particular global fragmentation when consensus and collective action is more vital than ever. Seeking, or assuming, shared (emotional) traits may risk glossing over real and significant social and cultural differences. But, given humanity's track record of dehumanising others and its horrific consequences, we believe this to be a risk worth taking in order to err on the side of a common humanity (cf. Hassan 1998: 334). More specifically, as stressed at the beginning of this chapter, our starting point is that archaeologists—as humans—use empathy all the time whether they recognise it or not. To reject, *a priori*, the role of empathy in archaeological thinking risks leaving embedded empathetic thinking intact and unaddressed.

Other angles in the ethical debate focus on the relationship between empathy and morality and, specifically, whether empathy leads to (im)moral behaviour. Proponents argue that by compelling consideration of multiple perspectives, empathy can reveal the situated nature of one's own position, leading to better understanding and action (e.g. Hoffman 2000). Conversely, opponents warn that by empathising, for example with criminals, we may slip into sympathising with them and the condoning of their immoral actions (for how an 'archaeology of the perpetrator' may distract from suffering, see Pollock & Bernbeck 2016: 34–35). While this may be a risk, however, making a clear distinction (as above) between empathy and sympathy allows for the rational evaluation and use of these emotional responses. The TV series *Spartacus: Blood and Sand* builds viewer empathy with a variety of characters, including slave owners,

but the series' moral compass remains clear (see Hobden, this volume).

A more significant concern is the risk of so-called here-and-now or familiarity bias. Humans have been described as “grotesquely partial to the near and dear” (Prinz 2011: 224), and there is empirical evidence that empathy quickly diminishes with cultural, social and physical distance (e.g. Hoffman 2000: 206–13). Basically, humans empathise more with proximate individuals with whom they share perceived connections than they do with large distant groups with whom they assume to share little in common (Bloom 2016). These biases violate the impartiality principle of morality and, to make matters worse, because empathy favours the in-group, it may intensify feelings of hostility in situations of group conflict (Bloom 2016; cf. Hoffman 2000: 215–16).

These biases are not easily resolved but, as with the issue of sympathy and morality above, can be partially addressed by the insistence that empathy should not lead directly from emotion to action, but must involve an intermediate step of explicit reflection and evaluation. In this way, we can become aware of our biases and counteract them. Empathy must be embedded in moral principles in order to rein in its inherent biases and to temper its rough edges (Hoffman 2000: 221–70).

As well as ethics, empathy also raises epistemological issues. Empathy is suggested to have two closely related epistemic credentials (Steinberg 2014: 56–59). First, it allows for an (quasi-)experiential dimension to be added to one's knowledge; second, this emotional or affective understanding allows some information to be encoded in a particularly 'user-friendly' way, which grants it a more significant role in how we think and act. Given the biases discussed above, it is important that empathetic insight be evaluated critically to ensure not only that it is used morally, but also that it is not inadvertently given undue weight because of its accessibility. Yet, neither of these issues requires the outright rejection of insight gained through empathy. Similarly, another epistemic concern is that empathy is unable to take sufficient account of cultural or other differences between empathiser and target (see Stueber 2006: 198–204). As every individual brings cultural background and personal history to each encounter, both empathiser and target will evaluate situations differently. While this complicates the act of empathy, it does not necessarily discount either the possibility or the value of the insights (e.g. Özyürek 2018).

In summary, while empathy generally may be perceived as a

positive and desirable cognitive capacity, and is almost always undertaken with good intention, it is not an unequivocal force for good. In particular, bias towards the ‘near and dear’ risks undermining the broader potential of empathy to kindle understanding across the contemporary world—and between present and past. Many of these issues, however, can be mitigated through conscious and careful reflection on the emotions generated before they are used for moral judgement and ethical action. In the words of philosopher Karsten Stueber (2006: 26), “recognising [the] limitations of empathy is not to deny that empathy must be regarded as the central default mode of understanding other agents”.

Archaeology and empathy: research

The earlier-cited examples demonstrate a variety of uses of empathy in archaeological research. Few of these, however, focus directly, or at length, on empathy itself, and overall there has been surprisingly little attention given to the subject. In the context of wider research on the role of emotion in archaeology, Sarah Tarlow (2000a, 2000b, 2010, 2012) has made the most significant and sustained contribution to this subject. Tarlow argues that archaeological approaches to emotion polarise around two positions: universalist versus constructivist. The former assumes that emotions are effectively hardwired and shared across the human species; the latter holds that emotions are constituted culturally and socially and therefore vary between groups across time and space. Although superficially these positions appear incompatible, Tarlow (2000a, 2012) explicitly conceives of them as either ends of a spectrum, noting that few in practice would argue them to be mutually exclusive; her own position is towards (but not at) the constructivist end of the spectrum (Tarlow 2000b: 741). As such, Tarlow demonstrates, within the archaeological literature, some of the key themes of general cross-cultural empathy discussed above.

In response to Harris and Sørensen’s (2010) consideration of the archaeology of emotions, Tarlow (2010: 185) remarks on the tendency of archaeological explorations of emotions and empathy to be rather banal or bland. Such criticism mirrors wider disappointment about the translation of general theoretical innovations into actual archaeological interpretations. This might suggest that, similar to arguments by Gibb (this volume) and Steinberg (2014, see below), empathy’s main benefits may lie not in providing new information but in the reordering of pre-existing information to shed new light. Tarlow

(2010: 184) argues that although “creative imagination is a key part of developing new theoretical insight, ungrounded and woolly exercises in imagining oneself into the past are not the province of academic archaeology”. Certainly empathy cannot be used to justify or prove any insights into the past, but it may nonetheless still suggest or influence ideas. It is perhaps for these reasons that the role played by empathy in archaeological thinking has been largely implicit. Recognition of empathy’s limits regarding justification of insight cannot be used to deny empathy’s central role in humans’ attempts to understand others (cf. Stueber 2006); such limits to empathy are not a reason to reject its investigation. Here, again, we see the potential of fictive techniques for archaeological research, through the adoption of explicit approaches to acknowledge existing forms of empathetic thinking and to explore its wider potential more rigorously.

Tarlow (2000a: 723–25, 2012: 178–79) also argues for distancing of the archaeology of emotion from both methodological and positional empathy. The former focuses the archaeologist’s emotional responses to the past he or she studies, that is, entering into the minds of past people, as we argue here; the latter denotes the idea that, through having had a certain experience, one gains privileged access to similar experiences in the past, for example, an archaeologist with children has a better idea about past parenthood than one without. Regarding this latter, positional form of empathy, the simple fact of sharing a certain experience is insufficient to claim special insight into the past, but it would defy reality to suggest that the experiences of the archaeologist do not shape, and potentially inform, their understanding. The problem with the outright rejection of positional empathy is the risk that it continues unconsciously to influence interpretation. While we may wish to avoid it, it would be preferable at least to admit when we believe it may have shaped thinking, whether a personal bereavement (Rosaldo 1993: 7–12) or the experiences of farming (Pryor 2003: 118), sailing between islands (Patton, this volume) or paddling a coracle (Elphinstone, this volume).

More generally, we would suggest that Tarlow’s issues lie mostly with the naive application of empathy. Many of her criticisms of the methodological use of empathy in archaeology can be addressed by adopting, as we argue above, an approach which allows for—indeed, insists upon—an intermediate step of critical reflection between the moment of empathy and the interpretation and use of that insight (cf. Thomas 2012: 226). Empathy does not and cannot grant instantaneous or direct understanding. Yet, although our position on emotions is

more universalist than that of Tarlow—preferring to risk (honest) misrepresentation of past people than the complete incomprehension implied in constructivism (cf. Tarlow 2006)—arguably our position does not differ radically in practice. Tarlow (2000a: 724) explicitly recognises the need for, and existence of, at least some common humanity to enable the possibility of any interpretation. We perceive a difference of emphasis not substance.

Collingwood and Gadamer

The study of empathy and its application to the past is closely associated with R.G. Collingwood. The concept of ‘historical empathy’ is often used in relation to his work, though he never used this terminology himself (Sheldon & Sylvester 2009: 10; Retz 2015: 216). Collingwood’s own term is the ‘re-enactment doctrine’. This approach was developed as part of his broader philosophy of history, which he explicitly took to encompass archaeology. Indeed, Collingwood’s archaeological research on Roman Britain played an important role in the development of his ideas (van der Dussen 2012: 7). The motivation for and basic form of the re-enactment doctrine are captured in the following passage:

a past whose thought the historian is unable thus to make his own, whether through lack of evidence or through defect in his own mental powers, [or] inability to sympathize with it, is a past at once dead and unknowable. [...] It implies that in order to understand a certain past event or state of society the historian must not only have sufficient documents at his disposal; he must also be, or make himself, the right kind of man: a man capable of entering into the minds of the persons whose history he is studying.

(Collingwood 1937: 143–44).

Although Collingwood does not explicitly acknowledge the concept of empathy here, the adaptation of this approach as a form of historical empathy is understandable, not least because, for Collingwood (1951: 110), “all history is the history of thought”—it is the thoughts that brought historical agents to act the way they did and that the historian must therefore discover in order to understand their actions in the past. Thought, he argues, has a kind of existence independent from the people who think it (Collingwood 1994: 297). When the

historian occupies the historical actor's place as thinker-of-the-thought, the actual historical thought is present in the historian's mind. It is this rethinking that is crucial to Collingwood's re-enactment doctrine—it is at the moment of rethinking that understanding occurs. The potential connection with historical fiction, as discussed in the introduction, is clear. Fictive techniques offer a tool to help us to see, and think, about the past from the perspective of individual historical agents.

In order to rethink a historical thought, the historian must, through his or her imagination, simulate the relevant elements of the past actor's situation and mental context pertaining to the emergence of the re-enacted thought (Collingwood 1951: 112). As discussed in the Introduction to this volume, imagination is not the same as invention or fiction. Furthermore, Collingwood (1994: 297) explicitly excluded emotions from the experiences that can be re-enacted; he was primarily concerned with rational historiography. The historian Arnold Toynbee (1954: 732) criticised this narrow conception, arguing that if the historian "is to participate in other people's experiences, he must participate, not only in their thought, but also in their emotions and in their volitions". It is almost certain, however, that Collingwood would have objected to the idea that re-enactment could lead to historical empathy, despite its resemblance to the other-oriented perspective-taking form of empathy described above. Fortunately, we do not need his approval to observe that his work seems to offer at least a link to a historical application of empathetic perspective taking.

The suspension of one's own thoughts in order to occupy the position of the historical thinker resonates with the central tenet of historicism: that is, to analyse and judge historical periods on their own terms rather than on the basis of the anachronistic ideas and preferences of the present. The extent to which Collingwood should be seen as a historicist is debated (van der Dussen 2012: 337–38), but we should evaluate how well his work fares under the criticism levelled at historicism. In particular, while Gadamer is sympathetic towards Collingwood's logic of question and answer, he rejects the notion of re-enactment (Palmer 1969: 200; Gadamer 1990; Johnsen & Olsen 1992; cf. Stueber 2002; Vardoulakis 2004). Gadamer (1990: 177–222) takes the historicists to task over their claim that present thoughts should be suspended in order to study the past; this, he maintains, is impossible. Historicism presupposes a non-existent vantage point outside of history from which one can observe it and pass judgement

(ibid., 280). It is our very historicity, our entanglement with a specific place and time (the present), that provides us with the basic foundation of understanding (ibid., 280–95). Hence, relinquishing this vantage point in order to judge the past on its own terms would entail abandoning the very position that enables that understanding (for a similar archaeological ‘re-humanising’ argument, requiring both the ‘authentic’ voice of the past *and* the outsider voice of the historian, though explicitly excluding empathy, see Fleming 2017: 37–38).

Gadamer’s analysis suggests that historicism is self-defeating since we, as humans, always approach an object of interpretation with certain prejudices (Gadamer 1990: 270–81). Prejudice (*Vorurteil*), for Gadamer, does not carry the pejorative connotations it has acquired since the Enlightenment. Instead, for him, it is literally that which precedes judgement. The constellation of our prejudices form the ‘horizon’ from which we engage in interpretation (ibid., 305–12). The metaphor of the horizon illustrates that our prior knowledge and concepts enable our thinking, but also limit it. The horizon puts those things within our view into perspective, but we cannot see beyond it. Our prejudices guide our initial attempts at interpretation. We attempt to fit the horizon of what we wish to interpret into our own. As the process continues, we encounter elements of this foreign horizon that are incompatible with ours. When this happens, and our prejudices are affronted (ibid., 272), we seek to reconcile this difference by changing our preconceptions of the object of interpretation in order to restore harmony. It is in this fusion of the two horizons that the moment of understanding exists. Yet, for this to be possible, all our prejudices must be put in the balance. In addition to judging the past on its terms, and on our terms, we also must be open to be changed by the past, if we are serious about wishing to understand it. In short, Gadamer argues that through the juxtaposition of horizons, our initial self-oriented perspective taking can approximate other-oriented perspective taking, while remaining fundamentally tethered to our present selves.

To put our prejudices in the balance, we must become aware of them, but we must not suspend them, or no true fusion can take place. Quarantining our prejudices not only risks disrespecting the past by rendering it irrelevant to the present, but also this would provide our prejudices with a ‘cloaking device’ to shape our views without us realising it. In such a situation, prejudice becomes that which limits our thinking in the way that we commonly use the term (ibid., 306).

Where does Gadamer’s critique leave the use of Collingwood’s work

to justify an openness to empathy in the study of the past? Gadamer's assessment of historicism seems to invalidate the use of empathy in this context, with or without the use of fictive techniques (cf. Stueber 2002; Vardoulakis 2004). An initial way of reconciling their ideas, however, is to examine the extent to which historical empathy as assigned to Collingwood actually corresponds with his own stated views. It has been argued that Collingwood's early critics misunderstood the re-enactment doctrine by interpreting it as a methodology. Van der Dussen (2012: 89–92) maintains that Collingwood was not describing a method for historical enquiry but rather stipulating the prerequisites for historical knowledge. The re-enactment doctrine would therefore not state that one imagines oneself in the historical actor's shoes and then achieves knowledge through living the actor's experience, but rather that only when we can think through the historical actor's thoughts and draw their conclusions in their situation can we say that historical knowledge has been achieved. In this sense, all the information has been collected and analysed before re-enactment takes place. The fact that we are able to re-enact past thoughts imaginatively after the research process indicates to us that we have achieved historical knowledge. In Collingwood's (1951: 114) words: "Historical knowledge is the re-enactment of a past thought incapsulated [sic] in a context of present thoughts which, by contradicting it, confine it to a plane different from theirs". As such, it appears that even though Gadamer's criticism of Collingwood is plausible (cf. Stueber 1994: 180), if we do not take too radical a reading of either author's work, the differences seem to be a matter of emphasis rather than kind (Retz 2015). By bringing together the ideas of these two philosophers, we now have the basis for an exploration of empathy with the past.

Gadamer insists upon the intrinsic historicity of the researcher in the present. This poses a problem for a conceptualisation of empathy that implies a loss of, or disregard for, the self. But it does not invalidate empathy as a process that permits a shift from self-oriented perspective taking to a (limited) other-oriented perspective taking. The similarity between van der Dussen's reading of Collingwood's re-enactment doctrine and Murray Smith's (2011: 114) argument that through the *mindfeeling* function "empathy does not serve to uncover possible new information, but to put the information that we do possess under a new description [...] allowing us to feel it 'from the inside'" is significant (see also Steinberg 2014).

Conclusions

Starting from the proposition that archaeologists already use empathy, whether they acknowledge it or not (see Johnson 1999: 104), we have sought to demonstrate how archaeologists—as any other humans—naturally, and more often than not unconsciously, turn to empathy for understanding (Stueber 2006: 26). The works of Collingwood and Gadamer, in particular, have been discussed as potential ways of developing empathetic understanding with people in the past. We argue that there is no inherent reason to fear the use of empathy in archaeological academic writing, provided that we do so explicitly and with purpose. The potential of empathetic understanding with and of past people appears to us to exceed the risks. Either way, the need to research further into the existing uses of empathy should be apparent. By providing characters with whom we can empathise, fiction is one yoke by which we might harness the power of empathy to enrich our understanding of the past. We cannot empathise with—or understand in human terms—post holes or stone scatters; we need people. Where the material culture or traditional archaeological methods do not provide them, we can try to imagine them in order to help us access and understand the human lives behind the broken artefacts (see Yentsch 1992: 283–84). We do not argue that all archaeologists should start writing articles empathising with their subjects; we do not advocate empathy as a methodology suited for all questions in all situations. Rather, we simply argue that its existing role is acknowledged and that its potential role is explored.

Nobel Prize winner Daniel Kahneman (2011: 174) has described how a variety of experiments demonstrate that people are much better at learning or changing long-held beliefs through the use not of general facts or statistics but of surprising individual examples that force them to confront and resolve incongruities. People are better at inferring from the particular to the general than deducing from the general to the particular. At the very least, this offers an argument for an open mind to, and an explicit consideration of, both empathy and fictive techniques when we seek to understand and communicate the past. Yet, empathy and fictive techniques must be used judiciously. Like vitamin A, a little is essential, a lot is toxic. We should not use them to build on the familiar to create empathy, recreating the present in the past. Instead, empathy offers a means of better understanding—but not necessarily condoning—the unfamiliar. Empathy must be used explicitly, but we see the integration of fictive

techniques as precisely one way to ensure that this is the case.

A good number of professional archaeologists and historians have turned, often later in their careers, to novel writing. It is suggested that this form of writing allows the expression of a creativity that we have been trained to eschew in academic accounts (cf. Pryor 2014). But how reliably are we able to maintain a meaningful distinction between the thinking involved and the two different forms of writing that follow? As many of the other chapters in this volume demonstrate, the differences between academic and fictional accounts lie predominantly in form and audience rather than in fundamental truth claims. We therefore argue that, beyond issues of definition and concerns about universalism, further investigation of empathy is essential if archaeologists are to engage more honestly and profoundly with how we understand the past.

There is no technological fix that will allow us to exist in the mind or body of another person, past or present. Empathy is all we can call upon. But empathy is not a mystical, direct and instantaneous connection; rather, it is both process and outcome, motivation and solution. It must be approached ethically and in an epistemologically sound manner. This requires the constant tacking back and forth between past and present, self and other (see Introduction, this volume). Such tacking is akin to the traditional hermeneutic approach to interpretation: moving from an understanding of the part to understanding of the whole and vice versa. In this analogy, the whole is our broader attempt to understand the past; the parts are traditional academic thinking and empathic exploration of past emotions (through fiction amongst other avenues). These parts need not be equal partners, but with different approaches we can capture the real benefits of empathy at the same time as we assuage fears of its biases and excesses.

A slight alteration to the full epigraph of Francisco Goya's *Caprichio* 43 (see [Figure 1.1](#), Introduction, this volume) sums up our argument nicely: empathy abandoned by reason produces impossible monsters, united with her, she is the mother of great understanding. There is no genuine concern, as many of empathy's detractors maintain, about the danger of the abandonment of reason. No serious proponent of empathy—in philosophy, psychology or archaeology—would maintain a position of uncritical reliance on empathy to the exclusion of rational thought and reflection. Conversely, how many archaeologists can say honestly they have not taken an imaginary wander around an ancient site and populated it with fictional people, or imagined the

sequence of events by which an object was lost in a drain only to be found centuries later during excavation? Recognising the role of empathy, however it is manifested in archaeological thinking, is essential. The judicious use of fictive techniques, we contend, is one effective way in which this might be addressed, allowing archaeologists to draw on both a developed body of theory and a myriad of examples.

So, take a walk in someone else's shoes. Their footwear may be uncomfortable, but blisters are a small price to pay.

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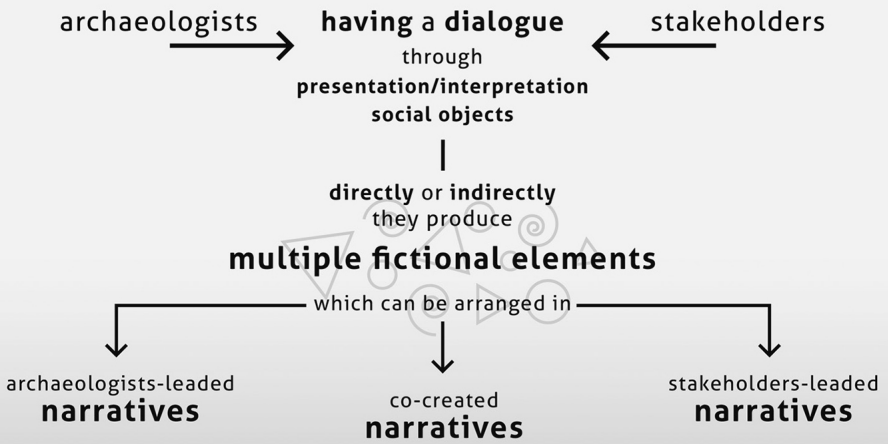
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THE EXCAVATION SITE



The Multiverse of Narratives





Project title	People and things in Vignale	The excavation of the "terramara" of Pilastri
Region	Tuscany	Emilia Romagna
Start year	2004	2013
Investigated period(s)	Roman and Late Antiquity (2nd century BC to 5th century AD)	Mid to Recent Bronze Age (17th to 12th century BC)
Scientific direction	Enrico Zanini and Elisabetta Giorgi, University of Siena	Massimo Vidale, University of Padua
Community activities	Muovimenti - Heritage Services	Workgroup Culture Keys
Website	www.uominiecosevignale.it	www.terramarapilastri.com



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SCUOLE PRIMARIE
(Classi dalla III alla VI)
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7The multiverse of fiction

Exploring interpretation through community
archaeology

Francesco Ripanti and Giulia Osti

Introduction

The techniques of fiction have been used widely and for many years to disseminate and publicise the end results of archaeological fieldwork and research projects. Reconstruction drawings and novelised accounts, for example, have been used to translate specialist materials into forms accessible by the public. Typically, ‘fictionalisation’ happens after the end of the research process and moves in one direction, from archaeologist to audience. But what happens when this step is embedded in the fieldwork process and evolves alongside the development of the archaeologists’ own understanding of a site? In this chapter, we examine the value of fiction not as ‘outreach’, but as an integral part of the archaeological process. Using two case studies, we analyse how fictional elements (such as characters, setting, motivation and plot) can emerge from the interactions between archaeologists and stakeholders, and how these elements can challenge and improve archaeological interpretations.

Any community archaeology project involves enormous effort by the archaeologists involved: the time required for archaeological investigations is often matched by that spent dealing with visitors to the site (e.g. locals, volunteers and school parties). Further, the relationships established between archaeologists and stakeholders can persist long after excavations have finished (for key themes in community archaeology, see Moshenska & Dhanjal 2012). We argue that the value of these projects and relationships extends beyond simple outreach and can contribute to the creation of knowledge and understanding that are as valuable to the archaeologist as they are to the public.

Narrative and imagination are fundamental tools used consciously or otherwise by every archaeologist (Shanks 2012). In general terms, a narrative can be defined as an account, spoken or written, of connected events—in other words, a story. In archaeology, the development and the use of different narrative forms have been widely discussed (e.g. Pluciennik et al. 1999; Praetzellis 1998; Joyce et al. 2002; Holtorf 2010a; Van Dyke & Bernbeck 2015). A theme that emerges from this work is the diversity of reasons for the use of these narrative devices. In the case of the present authors’ work—providing stakeholders with access to an ongoing excavation—the role of narrative is linked to two general purposes, as identified by Grima (2017: 76):

- 1.**Interpretation:** the contextualisation and organisation of archaeological information about the types and dates of past activity at a site
- 2.**Presentation:** the display and making accessible of an archaeological site for stakeholders and even for archaeologists specialising in other periods or regions.

Although closely connected, archaeological interpretation and presentation are two distinct processes that usually happen at different times. In the context of a community archaeology project, however, interpretation and presentation may be simultaneous, completely overlapping as a single integrated process. The situation stems from the two-way dialogue that occurs on site between archaeologists and stakeholders. Here, the different values and backgrounds of each group collide, generating a proliferation of fictional elements, often variants of the dominant narrative. We have chosen to define this process as the making of the ‘multiverse’, that is, a “hypothetical realm comprising a number of universes, of which our own universe is but one” (Collins English Dictionary). Each alternative ‘universe’ carries its own narrative structure, more or less influenced by the interaction between archaeologist and stakeholder, and presents infinite possibilities for use and development.

In this chapter, we present our experiences of fiction making as part of two community archaeology projects in Italy: Uomini e Cose a Vignale (People and Things at Vignale) (Tuscany) and excavations at the Terramara of Pilastrì (Emilia Romagna). As part of the first project, docudramas were used to present to the public the results of ongoing excavations. An unexpected result was that these productions directly stimulated the site’s archaeologists to think afresh about established research themes. Creating these fictional representations obliged the archaeologists to choose and develop situated perspectives, to ask different questions and to evaluate different scenarios to explain past activities. In turn, the docudramas fed into new ‘interpretative narratives’ of the site (as defined in McCarthy 2008: 541 and Silberman 2004: 119).

Meanwhile, at Pilastrì, scholarly debate around the purpose of ceramic cups with ‘horned handles’, a distinctive feature of the Bronze Age Terramare culture, was opened up to a larger and non-specialist audience. A creative writing competition for local schoolchildren, called *Tazze con le Corna* (Cups with Horns), resulted not only in deep stakeholder engagement but also, quite unexpectedly, generated a

proliferation of creative ideas that were of value for the archaeological interpretation of the site.

These two case studies allow exploration around the edges of archaeological interpretation and illustrate two different ways in which interpretation, public archaeology and fiction may intersect: the multiverse in the making. We start with a consideration of the theoretical background, before describing the narratives generated as part of the two projects. We then evaluate the social impact of these participatory activities and their influence on the archaeological interpretation of the sites, and reflect on the significance for our narrative multiverse theory.

A theoretical approach to making the multiverse

The term ‘multiverse’ has been used in a wide range of disciplinary contexts, including philosophy, physics, religion and literature, and with varied meaning and significance. In quantum mechanics, for example, the concept generally refers to the coexistence of all possible quantum states within a single infinite dimensional space (‘Hilbert space’), which contains multiple parallel universes defined by the presence of elements interacting at a local level. Deutsch (2002) argues that each universe shows a different combination of elements and its inner structure is defined by the flow of information at any given time and space.

In relation to archaeological narrative, we consider a single narration as a universe composed of real and fictional elements in variable quantities. The prevalence or otherwise of fictional elements depends on two main variables: who creates the story (the author) and the comprehensiveness of the archaeological record on which we rely (the sources). But how do these fictional elements emerge through the participatory process and, most importantly, what drives the creation of the multiverse? [Figure 7.1](#) visualises the conceptual framework, the actors and the key processes involved in making the multiverse.

Figure 7.1 Making the multiverse (graphic by Giulia Osti)

Community archaeology is a heterogeneous area of theory and practice, not least because its development is strongly linked to specific sociopolitical, economic and legislative contexts (Thomas 2017: 16). One core characteristic, however, is a strong orientation towards educational practices. Some of these—as with the two case studies below—are grounded in social constructivism, a theoretical

approach based on a model of dynamic learning that implies the shared and active construction of knowledge. From this perspective, the archaeologist becomes a facilitator who uses his or her own interpretation process as “the interface of the individual and the evidence and provides the ‘scaffolding’ to enable the visitors to make their own constructions” (Copeland 2009: 17). This promotes a negotiability of the ideas formed around a site and requires the development of a two-way dialogue between archaeologists and stakeholders. As a consequence, the barriers between the presentation and interpretation of the site recede, and the whole paired construction of presentation and interpretation becomes subject to an ongoing conversation.

Visitors to ongoing excavations frequently ask about the most recent discoveries, but archaeologists often do not yet possess sufficient information to provide solid interpretations of this material. More often than not, this ‘lack’ of information from the facilitator encourages visitors to propose their own alternative elements. Here is a common situation that can foster dialogue, lead to the creation of fictional elements and, potentially, feed back to the archaeologists’ interpretation of the site. But what facilitates this constructive dialogue? A crucial requirement is some common ground between archaeologist and stakeholder. This is provided by the archaeological site itself and its material evidence, the perceptions of which differ according to the personal, cultural and experiential backgrounds of each party.

Figure 7.2 Scene of archaeological presentation in Vignale (photograph by Enrico Zanini); the reconstruction of a vessel with horned handles on display in Pilastrì as a social object (photograph by Chiara Milanesi)

The two main vectors that trigger the conversation are archaeological presentation and social objects (Figure 7.2). The former coincides with the stakeholder’s initial encounter with the site, gathering basic information about it. Archaeological presentation is heavily mediated by the archaeologist and does not imply a balanced level of communication, but as information is digested and metabolised into knowledge, interaction and exchange increases. In contrast, the development of dialogue around social objects is more immediate, and does not require the creation of any specific background or framework within which to start communication. The concept of the ‘social object’ is borrowed from classical sociology.

These objects are defined by Simon (2010: 127) as “engines of socially networked experiences, the content around which conversation happens”. They are not necessarily physical objects, but they must represent entities or nodes of a network facilitating dialogue among diverse parties. Crucially, social objects operate through the creation of emotional connections. Referring to the museum environment, Simon describes four ways in which social objects may trigger dialogue: personal, active, provocative and relational. Of course, a museum environment is different from that of an ongoing excavation. On an archaeological site, for example, social objects are more deeply linked to the issue of visibility or presence; the more identifiable or impressive the evidence (e.g. a gateway or a mosaic), the more easily it may grab the stakeholder’s attention. As a result, a prehistoric site offers different possibilities for the development of dialogue than does a Roman site.

The creation of common ground between archaeologist and stakeholder creates room for dialogue mediated by archaeological interpretation and social objects. This dialogue allows for fictional elements to develop

- 1.directly, on the basis of physical features such as material culture, architecture or stratigraphy, or
- 2.indirectly, on the basis of elements that the archaeological record cannot provide.

In turn, these fictional elements are woven selectively into narratives under the influence of varied cultural, social, popular and academic themes. This creative process can be driven by both parties together or may be one-sided, resulting in three possibilities: the creation of archaeologist-led narratives, stakeholder-led narratives, and co-created narratives. In each case, the narrative is not necessarily developed by the same group that conceived the individual fictional elements. The process may also occur more than once and, as a result, it permits multivocality.

Case studies

Vignale and Pilastrì are presented here as case studies as much for their differences as for their similarities (Figure 7.3); another reason is the long-term participation of the two authors in these projects (FR at Vignale; GO at Pilastrì). As community archaeology projects, Vignale

and Pilastrì share aspects of organisation. Both, for example, are situated near small villages in the Italian countryside and both developed close relationships with local communities. On the other hand, they differ in their duration (16 years at Vignale, 5 at Pilastrì); they investigate different historical periods (classical antiquity and the Late Bronze Age respectively); and they approach techniques of fiction in distinct ways. In the following sections we introduce the sites, the projects and the particular contexts in which the fictional narratives were developed.

Figure 7.3 Overview of the two excavation projects (graphic by Francesco Ripanti)

Vignale: narrating excavation through docudrama

Vignale is an archaeological site on the coast of Tuscany, in the municipality of Piombino (Livorno) in an area called the Val di Cornia. The Uomini e Cose a Vignale project is organised by a team from the University of Siena (Dipartimento di Scienze Storiche e dei Beni Culturali) and led by Prof. Enrico Zanini and Dr. Elisabetta Giorgi. Since 2004, the project has conducted four or five weeks of excavation every September and October, focusing on structures occupied from the third century *bc* to the sixth century *ad*. The most notable features relate to a Roman posting station (*mansio*) and a villa (Giorgi & Zanini 2014; Giorgi 2016). The project began as traditional field school, but over the years has become a reference point for the nearby village of Riotorto. As a result of collaboration with local associations, schools and companies, the project has developed activities both for the purposes of outreach and to ensure the financial and social sustainability of the project (Mariotti et al. 2016).

For the Uomini e Cose a Vignale project, the use of narrative plays a major role in a number of outreach activities, especially in relation to the presentation of the site to the public. This choice results partly from the methods adopted for the excavation. In particular, the concept of reflexivity (Hodder 2000, 2002) has influenced archaeological practice in Vignale in many ways, including the integration of narrativity into daily on-site activity (Zanini 2011: 271–72). In practice, this played out, for example, through the use of video recordings, from the first season onwards, to document the evolution of the excavation, including the processes of interpretation and decision-making. These recordings included interviews with archaeologists, dialogues about hypotheses and related

interpretations, and the presentation of the excavation results with brief sequences of footage narrated in formal language. The use of dialogue, in particular, supports multivocality and fosters the fusion of different perspectives (Brill 2000; Joyce 2002). Recorded between 2004 and 2013, the project’s video archive documents a decade of day-to-day work at Vignale.

Fiction entered the project’s research programme with the experimental production of docudramas (Zanini & Ripanti 2012). A docudrama can be defined as “a cinematographic genre that seeks to meld documentary and fiction, re-enacting events that truly happened in a realistic way” (Canova 2009: 258; authors’ translation). At Vignale, docudramas took the form of short films conceived as ‘microstories’ set both in the past and in the present (Table 7.1).

Table 7.1 Summary of the Vignale docudramas

Italian (Italian / English)
The 1931 excavation and our attempt to superimpose the 2008 site map on Vignale 1831 site plan
Footage as a Vignale of Passages in Vignale centuries
Vignale (and the location of the ancient Via Aurelia
Morte a Vignale, 16-5-80 (Of the posting station
Death at Vignale
The Search for the Ancient Via Aurelia and the investigation of the minor road connecting it
High the site
Dealing with the destruction of the different excavation areas, focusing on narration, methodology, communication and community involvement

All of the docudramas were created by the same archaeologists who were excavating the site with the objective of narrating each current excavation season to the local community. This aim is evident in the case of the first docudrama produced, *Il Vignale ritrovato* (Vignale rediscovered). The plot involved the field director of the 1831 excavations visiting the site in 2008. The scope of the docudrama was to inform the public about the nineteenth-century research at Vignale and, above all, to show how the modern archaeologist works. The audience can empathise with the earlier field director, as they share the same common ground (i.e. a lack of knowledge about current archaeological methods). Subsequent docudramas focused on the narration of the ongoing excavation campaigns and relied more directly on the emerging archaeological results.

The 2011 excavation season, for example, focused on life at Vignale following the abandonment of the *mansio*. The docudrama *Morte a Vignale* (Death at Vignale) was inspired by investigations that had

revealed a woman's grave in the *mansio*'s courtyard (Figure 7.4). The setting is the abandoned building; the plot concerns the inhabitants' plans to rebuild it with new materials and techniques. The work begins, but during a disagreement with a contractor, a fight breaks out and the overseer's wife is killed. The site's inhabitants decide to bury her body in the courtyard, a disused but suitable place for an important woman. Images and videos of the excavation show the direct links between the fictional account and the archaeological investigations. Other docudramas—*Passaggi a Vignale*, *Mansio* and *Strada maestra*—similarly emphasise the connections back to the archaeological data. The final docudrama produced, *Dialoghi itineranti* (Travelling dialogues) is slightly different. Here, no scenes are set in the past. Instead, the research is presented through the words of the archaeologists who provide an overview of the project and its methods, narratives and community involvement.

Figure 7.4 Screenshots from the *Morte a Vignale* docudrama: the remains of the woman buried in the stone yard (left); the scene of the woman killed by the bandits (right)

The production of docudramas concluded in 2013. One of the reasons for this was the extraordinary discovery of a huge mosaic (Giorgi & Zanini 2016). This find marked a significant moment of change for the project, which then shifted its research focus to the fourth-century *ad* Roman villa. Whereas questions about the abandonment of the *mansio*, for example, provided good material for a fictional scenario, the materiality of the mosaic was less amenable to this particular narrative form. Instead, new activities have come to the fore. In 2014 and 2017, for example, the villa site was used as a stage for actors to perform for the public. The increased emphasis on live rather than prerecorded performances does not change the way in which narrative is used by the site's archaeologists. Rather, the shift from docudrama to live performance is simply a change of medium (though see Given, this volume).

Pilastrì: creative writing about ceramics

Pilastrì is a small division of the municipality of Bondeno (Ferrara, Italy) that includes a Bronze Age settlement (1600–1200 *bc*) comparable to the so-called Terramare culture of the central-western Po Plain. Following excavations in the twentieth century (Desantis & Steffè 1995), field investigations at the site had more or less ceased during the 2000s. New excavations at Pilastrì began in 2013 under

peculiar circumstances (see Osti et al. 2017), and the project thereafter took its definitive form as a ground-up “public archaeology experiment” (Bergamini et al. 2015). Characterised by strong community involvement, the project continues to refine and develop its work with local stakeholders.

During the 2015 season, one of our sponsors, a local businessman, offered funds to incentivise children’s engagement with archaeology, during and after school hours. We proposed that this should focus on some ‘hot topic’ of the current investigations and opted for a writing competition for primary school and high school children visiting the excavation. To facilitate dialogue with the children, we chose a group of distinctive ceramic vessels with horned handles, one of the most abundant categories of material culture from our excavations—as well as an obvious ‘social object’. The colloquial archaeological name for these artefacts was also used as the name for the competition: *Tazze con le Corna* or ‘Cups with Horns’.

With their uplifted handles, *tazze con le corna* are the most well-documented and best-published artefacts in the archaeological literature on the Middle to Recent Bronze Age in Northern and Central Italy (Frontini 2011). They are also one of the most distinctive visual elements attributable to that period. Their relevance as ‘index fossils’ is still debated (Blake 2014), as is the question of whether they served functional and/or symbolic roles (Damiani 2010). Among the many different types of such vessels, we chose a form with lateral ‘horn-like’ features, on account of their abundance at the Pilastrì site and for the way in which they evoke other contemporaneous and better-known cultures, such as the Minoans and Mycenaeans. The promotional poster for the competition set out the challenge (Figure 7.5).

Figure 7.5 Promotional poster for the *Tazze con le Corna* competition (graphic by Giulia Osti)

We challenged the visiting schoolchildren to create stories about the archaeologists digging at Pilastrì or about the lives of the site’s ancient inhabitants. Two sets of materials were provided. The first included information sheets with nonspecialist overviews of Terramare culture, made available for download from our website. The second was a set of inspirational elements to facilitate—and channel—the creation of narratives. The ‘guidelines for the authors’ were provided in PDF format and paired with a video (Osti 2015), available through the project’s website and on YouTube. The latter was conceived as a realistic but fictional representation of the daily

routine of an ongoing excavation. It featured a boy called David moving around the excavation, trying to figure out the archaeologists' work and the meaning and interpretation of the archaeological discoveries. The entire plot, which ends with the breaking of the fourth wall, was informed by the most frequent questions asked by visitors to the site in previous years (by both adults and children). The idea was to help the non-expert to avoid common conceptual errors when preparing their own narratives.

The best stories were subsequently published in a dedicated volume. To extend the participatory process to a still broader audience, we also invited professional artists from the local area to produce bespoke illustrations for each story included in the collection. The final volume included five stories with five matching artworks and is available to download at: <https://goo.gl/wdDPfn> (in Italian).

Discussion: the interpretation within

Although the two case study projects did not share the same goals, the outcomes of these experiences impacted on the archaeological interpretation of each site in similar and unplanned ways. Conversely, we are aware that these experiences leave largely unexplored the full range of possibilities for dialogue with stakeholders. This situation reflects the ways in which these projects evolved, setting out with the expectation of conventional 'one-way' archaeological outreach. In fact, this is typical of the practice of community (and in a broader sense, public) archaeology in Italy, which is in a state of flux and still developing its own theoretical framework (Bonacchi 2013). For current purposes, it is enough to note that what emerged from these two experiences was the value of narrative as a stimulus to deeper and ongoing reflection on interpretation. In practical terms, let us see how these projects benefited from dialogue and fiction-making activities to enhance their interpretations.

At Vignale, the archaeologists came to recognise that developing presentation through docudramas could provide unexpected benefits for interpretation in the form of creative ideas and suggestions. As we identified new research goals and new parts of the site to be investigated, we sketched possible themes for future docudramas. But only when excavation was underway were we able to define the main themes to be developed as a microstory. The titles of the docudramas reflect those choices; indeed, choosing a title forced us to link together the different aspects of work in progress and to put them into the site

context much earlier than we would have done normally. These were the first occasions in which interpretation and presentation began to elide. As the project developed, recurrent themes became apparent: the *mansio*, the late antique period and the use of particular buildings became the dominant topics.

As a result, although the goal of the docudramas was outreach, at a certain point it became apparent that the stories were ‘embodied hypotheses’, offering a way to enrich and add meaning to the archaeological evidence. The script writing also provided another opportunity for continuous interpretation by forcing us to address the research questions from different perspectives or to find new research questions. *Mansio* and *Strada maestra*, for example, were set in a period at the end of the Roman Empire, when the ancient Via Aurelia had become a dangerous and ruined track. In turn, this implied the existence of a more protected and hidden route located in the hills behind Vignale. This quest provided a reliable scenario for the excavation narrative, which otherwise would have been neglected.

The influence of docudramas on the archaeological interpretation of the site is also evident in some of the video notes recorded by the archaeologists during the fieldwork. In 2011, for example, the field director Enrico Zanini presented, in the form of a story, the work in progress in two areas under investigation. Some of the research questions were expressed from the perspective of the past inhabitants of the site, such as “If I were a Lord that lived here in the fifth century ad, I [...] would fix this ruined floor”. Other questions were posed from the archaeologists’ perspective. Later, these excerpts became part of the docudrama *Morte a Vignale*. One of the most interesting outcomes of this docudrama appears in the end credits where we see two dialogues among the archaeologists who previously performed as actors. Without a script, they discuss their conclusions about the site. In the first dialogue, the archaeologists who investigated the woman’s grave propose a hypothesis about the possible existence of a nearby church. In the second dialogue, another group of archaeologists are concerned with the function of a room they had investigated: they are uncertain whether or not it was a stable and they are looking forward to the next season in order to gain a better understanding. In this case, the deep engagement of the archaeologists in the docudrama encouraged dialogue and the development of multivocality.

Similarly, the Tazze con le Corna competition provided fictional elements for the archaeological interpretation of Pilastrì, by inspiring the archaeologists to reflect on multiple points of view. Delving more

deeply into the children’s fictional stories stimulated the archaeologists to rethink narratives that are generally dismissed as ‘alternative’ and to reconsider their potential contribution to the archaeological interpretation of the site. Table 7.2 outlines fictional elements of the five published stories to illustrate the extent of this shift.

Table 7.2 Fictional elements emerging from the stories written for the Tazze con le Corna competition

Principal of the Village		
Presence		
Epitaphic, magicryside fishing		
Epitaphic shard tells studying the past		
Epitaphic shard tells fishing		
Epitaphic shard tells the very famous cups with horns		
Epitaphic shard tells reading and writing		
Epitaphic shard tells hunting		

The variables that appear in the columns labelled ‘Landscape’ and ‘Activities’ show that the children paid careful attention to the explanations and support materials provided by the archaeologists; the children’s stories are consistent with the overall archaeological interpretation of the site. Although difficult to quantify, this suggests that we managed successfully to communicate a basic educational message, one of the principal goals of the initiative. What impacted most fully on the archaeological interpretation, however, was the centrality of the *tazze con le corna* within the stories, even though this had not been a requirement. The contexts and uses proposed for these vessels were surprisingly varied, going far beyond what had been explained or even suggested by the archaeologists and, for this reason, were of some inspiration.

In the first story, “Ari and the Magic Jar”, the young protagonist finds the eponymous vessel hidden in the hollow of an oak. As he tries to retrieve it, a dazzling light is emitted and the voice of a spirit reveals a prophecy: “Ari, do not be afraid! I was waiting for you to come! A long period of drought and famine will affect your *Terramara*, but the cruel fate of your village can be deferred”. At the end of the story, the magical properties of the jar, mixed with the power of the herbal infusions made by Ari’s mother, allow the villagers to overcome the immediate threat, though their fate is only averted for a

couple of centuries. This narrative strongly recalls the collapse of the Terramare culture, conventionally dated to c. 1200 bc, during the final phases of Recent Bronze Age. The story echoes some of the mainstream hypotheses—climate change, drought and famine—used to explain the socio-economic collapse and abandonment of the Terramare settlements (see Cardarelli 2009; Kneisel et al. 2012; Cremaschi 2017). Interestingly, archaeologists had not previously associated these particular vessels with the wider processes of social and environmental change, a connection worthy of further investigation.

The last story, “The Life of Mandhu”, emphasises the use of these vessels for feasting. Mandhu, the young protagonist, defeats the bear that caused the death of his best friend; “That evening was organised a great party in honour of Mandhu [...]. Then, the participants brought their vessels with horned handles and started to toast and dance, remembering the one great hero under the full moon”. Bears are not attested in the Po Plain in this period, although some bone artefacts, such as bears’ teeth, circulated for ornamental purposes (Rubat Borel 2011); nonetheless, wild boars or wolves constituted a menace for the inhabitants of the village. The archaeozoological data from Pilastrì suggest that hunting made a limited contribution to the villagers’ diet (Farello 1995); the successful hunting of large mammals therefore probably had symbolic significance for the inhabitants and could legitimately be considered a valid reason to celebrate. Finally, the suggestion of alcohol consumption is supported by recent gas chromatography-mass spectrometry conducted on five ceramic sherds from Pilastrì that indicates traces of fermented beverages (Pecci et al. 2017). Although the potential use of these vessels for drinking remains one of our main research questions, the exchange of ornamental bone artefacts, indirectly suggested by the story, is an underdeveloped research theme worth fuller consideration.

Towards the creation of social value

Archaeological fiction linked to fieldwork is still a new subject and its potential remains undeveloped, especially in Italian archaeology. Yet, narrative and imagination are fundamental tools used by all archaeologists (McCarthy 2008: 541). Allowing stakeholders to develop their own narratives and, in particular, to develop opportunities for the co-creation of narratives can “improve society and [...] support people’s own cultural ambitions and creative

potentials” (Holtorf 2010b: 51). The reason why this process facilitates the creation of social value and brings archaeology closer to contemporary society is that “stories about remains of the past are much more stories about the present” (Holtorf 2010b: 50).

A theme, for example, that emerged explicitly in the fourth story published in the *Tazze con le Corna* volume was clearly a transposition into the past of the dramatic circumstances—the 2012 earthquake in Emilia Romagna—that led to the restarting of excavations at Pilastrì in 2013 (see Osti et al. 2017: 48). Creating stories about the past that incorporate current events contributes to the building of collective memories, as well as reduces the distance between past and present. Of course, the opposite can also occur, where a past situation or event is transposed to the present. The docudrama *Passaggi a Vignale*, for example, highlights a particular issue of significance for the inhabitants of Vignale over the long term. During Roman times and the nineteenth century, and through to the present, this place has been a way station for travellers en route elsewhere, and the first scene shows the Pisa-Grosseto train passing by without stopping at the railway yard of Vignale-Riotorto.

To create such dialogues with stakeholders, however, and to generate narratives and social value, requires an important factor: time. The sustained nature of the projects at Vignale and Pilastrì fostered the development of dialogue and, consequently, deepened the level of interaction with local people, who represent the majority of the stakeholders for both projects. At the very beginning of the research at Vignale, the archaeologists were considered ‘outsiders’ by the locals, as they came from Siena, 150km away. The docudramas were one of the first steps expressly aimed at local collaboration. It took time but, after some years, the local residents began to visit the site regularly and to contribute actively on their own initiative. This was another reason that the recorded docudramas were replaced with live performances, where local groups could more easily play a role and start to develop an affective connection with the site (Ripanti & Mariotti 2018).

In contrast with the situation at Vignale, at Pilastrì the core members of the archaeology team were native to the area (and fluent in local dialect) and already had a good relationship with the local stakeholders. Here, all efforts were focused on the development of connections with schoolteachers. The dramatic increase in the numbers of schoolchildren visiting the site over the first three years of the excavation (from 180 in 2013 to 565 in 2015, Osti 2017 et al.: 51)

reflects the educational ambitions of the project and, most of all, the strong relationship created with the local schools. Tazze con le Corna was the first activity that had resonance beyond the intended audience, thanks in particular to the creation of a connection between children (writers) and adults (artists), a fact that did not pass unnoticed by the locals. Starting almost a decade later than the Vignale project, the work at Pilastri benefited from much greater awareness of the importance of the involvement of local communities and of on-site public engagement (for an overview, Ripanti 2017).

Conclusions

As part of the practice of community archaeology, the various dialogues that lead to the creation of narratives deserve careful investigation. On the basis of our own experiences, we have noticed how interaction between stakeholders and archaeologists has had a great influence on the development of these projects. Not least, we have seen how narratives can be created and how these can be a valuable resource for both the parties, even if perceived and used in different ways. We have sketched the main variables and processes occurring during the presentation of the sites, especially the development of the dialogues between archaeologists and audiences, framing them within what we call the ‘multiverse theory’. We suggest that archaeological presentation and social objects are the main vectors for the creation of on-site narratives. The two case studies have presented aspects of this process, although as they were conceived for different purposes at different times, they cannot fully represent the possibilities of that moment of on-site archaeologist-stakeholder contact. The use of narrative by both the projects, however, resulted incidentally in the opportunity and incentive to address and refine research questions and to develop alternative hypotheses for archaeological interpretation.

To make the narrative elements relevant for archaeological interpretation, we need to read between the lines. After all, the docudramas discussed above were amateur productions, and the stories submitted for the writing competition were written by schoolchildren, but it is undeniable that isolated elements of these productions display degrees of plausibility. It is up to archaeologists to put these elements into relation to one another and to draw inspiration from them. In this way, archaeologists are forced to think again about a building or an object, and to consider and discuss new

and unexplored perspectives. Conversely, stakeholders gain the potential to participate meaningfully in projects and to forge and express their own contributions, creating meaning from the experience. For archaeologists, this dialogue produces food for thought; for various stakeholders it can be a source of social value. There are many other potential narratives for both Vignale and Pilastrì. Exploring these alternative universes may lead to more or less relevant results, but will certainly broaden our knowledge and encourage reflection on the wider social context of our archaeological stories.

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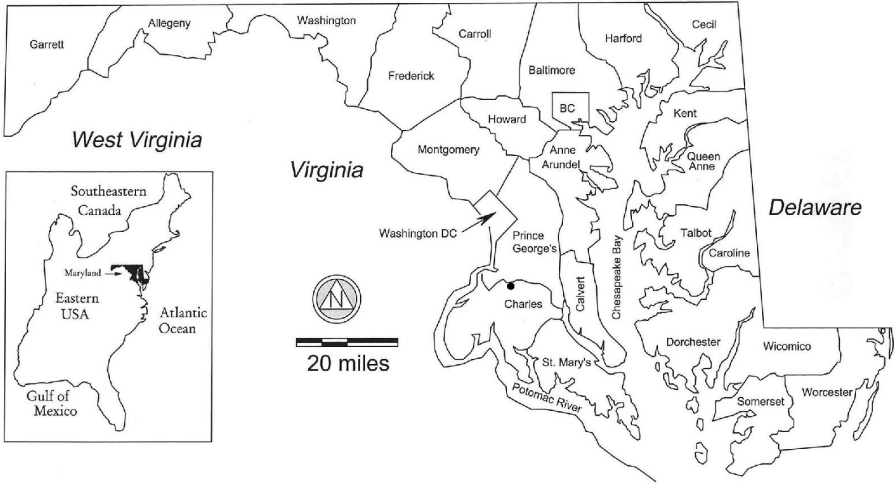
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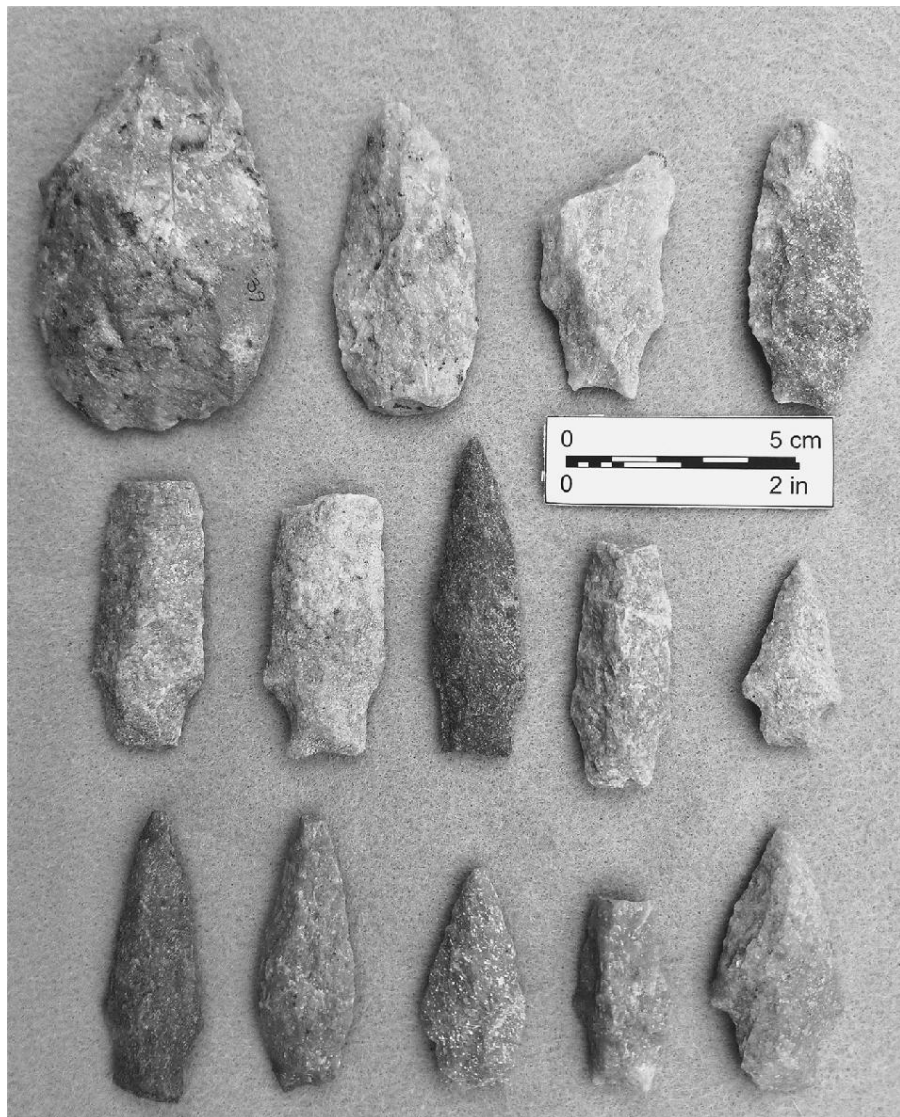
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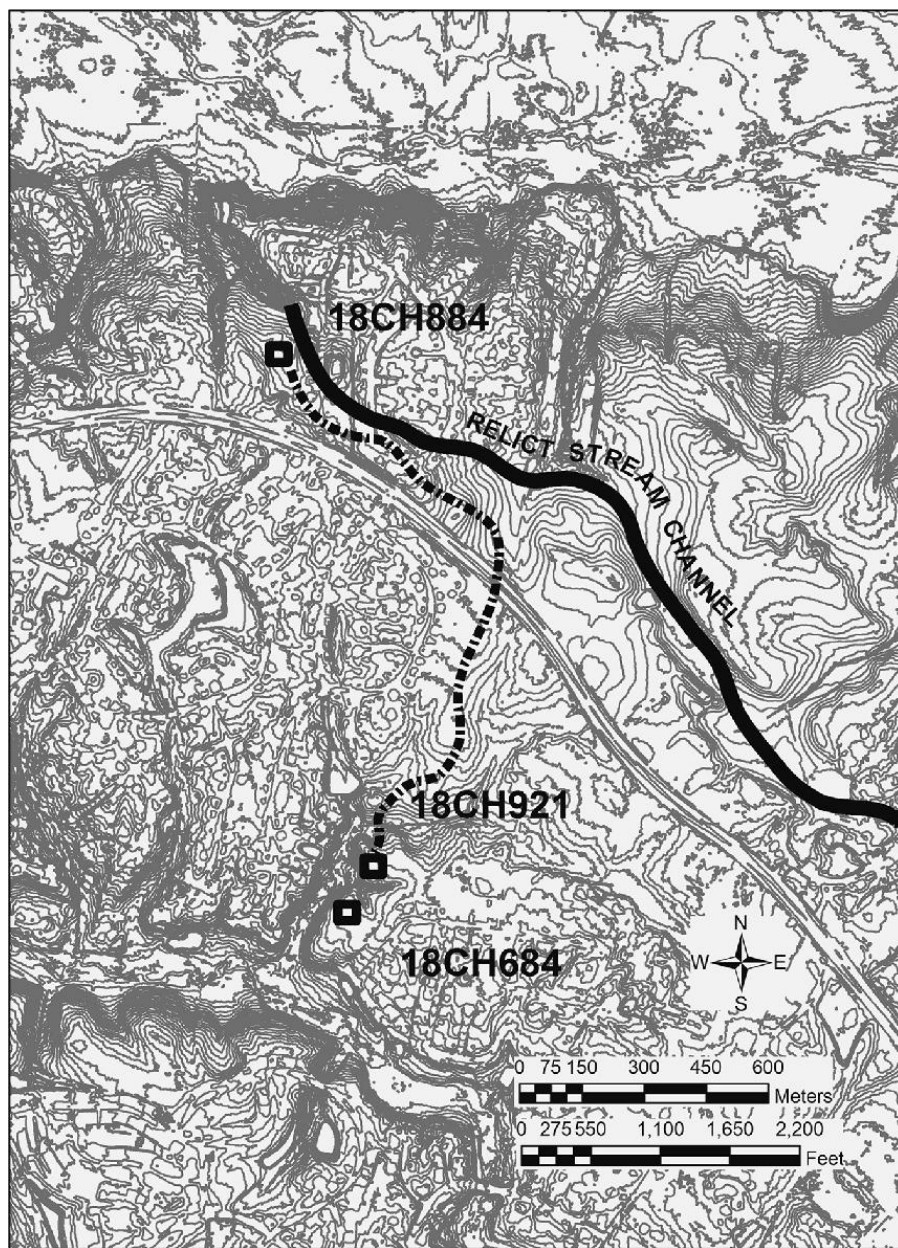
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Pennsylvania







8Entering undocumented pasts through playwriting

James G. Gibb

Introduction

We—reader and writer—find ourselves in the midst of the story. It began with our intellectual forebears' initial forays into the ancient pasts of Southwest Asia, North Africa, Europe and North America in the eighteenth century, fluoresced in the worldwide anthropology and archaeology of the mid-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—a period of maturing colonialism and imperialism—and continues into the so-called postcolonial period of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Now the province of largely middle-class white professionals, rather than of upper-class white amateurs (at least in the United States, Canada and Europe), archaeology as a subdiscipline of anthropology (in the New World tradition) faces both the original challenges of determining what happened, when and why, and the newer challenge: by what right do I, as a white, middle-class citizen of a Western democracy, appropriate the legacies of peoples with whom I have no demonstrated connection, or upon whom Western powers imposed unequal power relationships? Even potential connections to eighteenth-century Scots merchants in the New World and Roman citizens and subjects—my father, born a Glaswegian, my mother's family from Potenza in southern Italy—remain undemonstrated. And, even if they could be established, am I arguably any better fitted to understand those people than I am to understand peoples and cultures with which my historical connections are highly improbable? Ethically, with a perspective steeped in the very traditions that denied non-Western societies theirs, can I use the resources of privileged position to construct and use the pasts of others? In doing so, am I guilty of committing “diachronic violence”, of disrespecting past people by projecting on them my sensibilities and politics (Bernbeck 2015: 261)?

As if these ethical questions were insufficiently daunting, there are the practical matters of how one studies peoples who have left no intentional record of their lives and ideas. Material detritus focuses scholarly attention on the tangible aspects of past lives. How did they distribute themselves across the landscape, what did they eat and what technologies did they use in adapting to local ecosystems? And, more germane to the problem at hand, how can we answer questions for which there is no obvious material evidence? How can we climb Hawkes' ‘ladder of inference’ with the meagre remains of non-agricultural societies (Hawkes 1954; Henson, this volume)? Can we translate such evidence into individual actions and conversations

(Patton, this volume), or—as Elphinstone (this volume) phrases it—can we penetrate the ‘silences’ and approximate the experiences of past peoples and achieve a degree of empathy that contributes to understandings of our common humanity (van Helden & Witcher, this volume)?

These are the issues I address in this chapter. Like the novelist who starts the reader in the middle of the action and fills in the background as necessary—“A story has no beginning or end; arbitrarily one chooses that moment of experience from which to look back or from which to look ahead” (Greene 1951: 1)—I begin with immediate professional problems and refer back to the historical and theoretical development of anthropology only as it seems necessary. The title *Philosophiae Doctor* notwithstanding, I am a practising archaeologist, not a philosopher: fulfilling commercial archaeology contracts as a businessman and developing and implementing a research programme for the Smithsonian Environmental Research Center as a research associate are my professional roles. My background colours my perspective, not only where I work along the continuum of theory and practice but also in terms of goals: commercial, humanistic and scientific. I refuse to choose between science and humanism (like all heuristics, an arbitrary distinction), operating within both broad philosophical traditions. While I lean more towards science, my questions exclude neither tradition. Commerce pays the mortgage and funds much of the research, so it always imposes constraints on the level of effort, but not on the specific questions of my investigations: commerce does not determine the questions that I ask, but it does limit the resources I can allocate to answering them.

For me, there are two essential questions, the answers to which never will be entirely satisfactory:

1. How can we achieve understanding of past peoples’ views of the world, of themselves and of their own places in the world to advance our humanistic and scientific goals?
2. What is my ethical justification for attempting such an understanding?

Because so much of Question #1 assumes an answer to Question #2, I begin with the latter. To be clear at the outset, however, my justification is mine. You might use it as a model, but I impose no rule, make no expectation of others. You are on your own.

The method for addressing, in part, the first question, has been described elsewhere (Gibb 2003, 2015) and warrants only summary treatment below. The key difference is in the application of the playwriting approach to ‘silent peoples’ that is to say, those who have left little obvious evidence of who they were and why they made the choices they did—indeed, even what those choices were. Literate societies enfold ‘silent peoples’, the alienated and marginalised of all legal statuses, but they portray them to a greater or lesser extent, and those portrayals can be critiqued and used. This chapter specifically addresses aboriginal peoples, centuries removed from any literate society.

Ethical challenges

The award of an advanced academic degree seems to authorise research, writing and lecturing; it is a licence to practise, albeit qualified in some fields by other requirements such as internships and passage of board examinations, or minimum periods of experience under the supervision of a senior practitioner. That probably is a reasonable assumption to the extent that institutions of higher learning receive funding and accreditation from other institutions and at least tacit approval from those participating in graduate programmes, often at great expense. But it is also reasonable to assume that not every member of a particular society recognises the legitimacy of its colleges and universities, or of specific programmes. It is a near certainty many outside of that society and those who died centuries earlier have not sanctioned those institutions or their graduates. Let us assume, then, that a graduate degree in hand represents acknowledgement from a faculty that the bearer has achieved a level of understanding of a field, but a licence to practise in the social and historical sciences is a contested matter.

My moral authority as an archaeologist, metaphorically, seems situated somewhere between that of an unauthorised biographer and a psychiatrist publicly divulging without consent the treatment of a patient. The intrusiveness of the social and historical sciences, however, goes beyond the invasion of a single individual’s privacy and is rendered more ethically dubious in that my ‘patients’ typically are long dead (Scarre 2006; Tarlow 2006) and, if they have trustees looking after their legacies, those trustees often lack the political and economic power to challenge me or the institutions with which I collaborate (e.g. Smithsonian Institution for supporting my research,

and professional societies and corporations publishing my work). Even for work on the modern era, where I might draw direct connections between myself and some of those past peoples I study ('my people'), I cannot draw those connections to all people. British colonists of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in the Chesapeake region of North America might be legitimate research targets for me if direct historical connection is the issue, but what of the enslaved Africans and indigenous peoples in the region whose histories cannot be set aside like variables in a physics experiment? By whose authority do I speak—or not speak—for them?

Archaeologists can, and should, discuss these matters frequently. In doing so we will achieve ever more understanding and sympathy for those whom we study and their descendants, but a final resolution of who gets to study whom and under what conditions seems unlikely. Even consultation with descendant communities, although both respectful and scientifically valuable, cannot guarantee consensus on the conditions of any one study. We cannot expect a descendant community to be of one mind any more than we should expect complete agreement among participants at an archaeology conference. My (imperfect) solution is that we acknowledge the potential misunderstandings and ethical conflicts of archaeology in each archaeological product, and recognise that we may not represent the people we study in the ways that they would have wished (for discussions on archaeologists' responsibilities to the dead, see Scarre 2006; Tarlow 2006).

Native Americans and animists around the world, recognising that they must destroy to live (Brody 2002; Elphinstone, this volume), beg forgiveness or thank animal spirits for their sacrifices that enable their people to survive. The global monotheistic religions also have means of giving thanks for the lives destroyed to insure the persistence of their own (nowhere better illustrated than in the various rites and practices of the Christian sects). In like manner, we survive, professionally and economically, on the cultural carcasses of past peoples. We cannot practise our craft without using our situationally based conceptions of the past lifeways, ethical codes and cultural products of other peoples. Perhaps, like animists, we should recognise this predatory or carrion-feeding behaviour as indispensable and thank our subjects for what they have left for us and apologise for the misrepresentations that inevitably arise, at one level or another, from our portrayals. Dedications and acknowledgements are suitable places for such recognition, and we should find other means of thanking and

apologising. Perhaps the last sentence in most acknowledgements should be altered:

All errors of omission and commission, and all misrepresentations of the past, are my responsibility. To my subjects, I thank you for what you have left me and apologise for any harm that I might unwillingly commit to your reputations and legacy.

This also may be a suitable place in which, following Kavanagh (this volume), a writer might express the wonder and appreciation of being, if only vicariously, a part of the community we are studying.

Adopting this practice is important for all archaeological research, and perhaps for all work in the social and historical sciences. It has even greater import for the approach I have used elsewhere (Gibb 2003, 2015), and which I also use below. A significant development is in my choice of subjects: indigenous peoples occupying the Chesapeake Bay watershed several thousand years ago. We have no idea what they called themselves. They left no written or indisputable pictographic record (rare petroglyphs in the region defy attribution to a specific archaeological culture) and only very rare examples of surviving artefacts made of organic materials, the plasticity of which may permit greater symbolic expression. Predominantly, therefore, we have stone artefacts and the spatial relationships between them, and between the sites on which they are found, and the partially reconstructed settings those peoples occupied. Playwriting—putting words in their mouths—as part of a method to understand them seems the height of arrogance and a form of continued colonialism (Bernbeck 2015). It allows us to project our values onto the peoples we try to represent, creating portrayals that they might not recognise and imposing a false history on their descendants. Perhaps this method is arrogant and imperialist, but as long as people reach back into the pasts—theirs and those of others—they will appropriate those pasts, and the best that we can hope for is constant redevelopment, application and adherence to an ethical code that guides usage of the legacies of others.

Practical challenges

In the 1990s, I wrote two short plays for a local historical site manager at her request. Each play—produced at the London Town historic site in Maryland, USA—revealed aspects of the American

Revolutionary War era that I had not considered while working at the colonial-period town site with an archaeological team (Gibb 2003). Years later, I experimented with writing short scenes about another Maryland colonial port town, this time seeking answers to a question that archival and archaeological sources seemed unable to address: the people of Port Tobacco witnessed the effects of tobacco cultivation on the sedimentation of the creek that connected them to global trade networks. What, if anything, did they do to avoid degradation and, ultimately, destruction of that vital connection between their town and the global economy? One of the two vignettes suggested conventionally acquired archaeological data—the maintenance and expansion of warehouses—as a measure of the town’s adaptation to impending catastrophe (Gibb 2015). The exercise suggested that in the second half of the eighteenth century, as seems true in Western societies today, people opted to adapt to, rather than reverse, economically damaging environmental changes that were largely of their own making. (The other vignette revealed the tensions and divisions between the archaeological team and the current residents of Port Tobacco, each concerned about different aspects of the town’s past and for different reasons.)

These experiments drew on rich sources of archival and archaeological data, coupled with literary and other sources. In short, they contended with literate societies with which I share language, history and culture. The experiments led to models from which we might gain insight into previously unrecognised sources of data or into unrecognised dimensions of data sources already used and presumed exhausted. They also gave expression to individual persons—historical and fictitious—with whom (if well written) we might develop empathy (see chapters by van Helden & Witcher and Elphinstone, this volume). But can playwriting, or for that matter any artistic form, be applied appropriately and productively to the study of a past nonliterate society for which even oral traditions have been lost? (This in contrast to such artists as Pablo Picasso, who explicitly used the aesthetics of contemporary nonliterate peoples to understand modern Western societies.) Can playwriting translate mute objects into past motivations and actions (Patton, this volume), make sense of ‘silent’ societies (Ripanti & Osti, this volume)?

Playwriting functions through words and, specifically, through dialogue. Expressions of gratitude and contrition notwithstanding, putting words into the mouths of indigenous people who existed millennia ago as if we are ventriloquists and they are our dummies

seems disrespectful and unwarrantable. The words—our words—convey meanings and relationships that may have been alien to these people. Translation between living languages poses its own hurdles and pitfalls: translating English (in my case) to a language of which we know nothing is impossible. Writing a scene to explore the behaviours of a long extinct people with no demonstrable linguistic connection to the present seems destined to failure at the outset. But all is not hopeless. The scene below follows the method described in earlier publications (Gibb 2003, 2015)—with a twist. First, I lay out the scientific problem, then describe the setting and the characters, and finally put into motion the characters in that setting (for similar approaches, see Henson; Ripanti & Osti, and Savani & Thompson, this volume). I could do so with a Wellsian time machine plot device, but have opted for what I hope is a more interesting and contemporary approach.

The problem

The Chesapeake Bay is the largest estuary in North America ([Figure 8.1](#)), extending 300km in length and covering about 166,000km² its watershed takes in several states and physiographic provinces (Brush 2017). The Bay, as it is colloquially known, formed through sea-level rise and tectonic subsidence—the Atlantic Ocean inundating the ancestral Susquehanna River—reaching its current configuration about 3,000 years ago. Human communities had occupied the region for millennia (estimates exceed 12,000 years ago), largely in small, mobile groups that coalesced briefly at certain times of the year to exploit seasonally rich resources, to find mates for their children and to exchange information and material goods that created and strengthened intergroup relations (Custer 1984; Dent 1995; Stewart et al. 2016). This widely accepted fission-fusion model draws on ethnographic studies and specific details of the local archaeological record.

Figure 8.1 Map of the Chesapeake Bay region (image by James Gibb)

Prior to the adoption of pottery making, which occurred during the Early Woodland period (1250 bc–ad 50), indigenous peoples relied upon a wide range of natural materials from which they fashioned tools, but only those of stone survive to any extent ([Table 8.1](#)). The artefacts typically found consist largely of flaked stone tools (flake and bifacial core technologies), lithic waste and, less commonly,

groundstone celts/adzes and atlatl weights (from spear-throwing sticks). Varying amounts of fire-cracked rock—pebbles that were heated and then dropped into sealed baskets and wooden containers to boil the contents, eventually fracturing from thermal shock—also are recovered, the relative quantities depending on the kind of site investigated, as will become clear below.

Table 8.1 Archaeological periods in the Middle Atlantic region of the USA

Period
Pre-10,000 bp
10,000–6,000 bp
6,000–4,000 bp
4,000–2,500 bp
2,500–1,250 bp
1,250–500 bp
500 bp–AD
AD 1000–1700
1700–1800
1800–1900
1900–1950
1950–2000
2000–2010
2010–2020
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flowed when the sites were occupied (Lee 2017; Gibb 2018). Upland sites often occur along the edges of upland flats, overlooking stream valleys and often having southerly aspects suggesting winter occupations that took advantage of passive solar heating. The Terminal Archaic period also differs from preceding and succeeding periods in its marked increase in the variety of local projectile point styles and the spread of a few styles (Figure 8.2) characterised by well-developed stems and broad blades (Broadspears) distributed throughout what is now the US East Coast, from New England to the Gulf of Mexico.

Figure 8.2 Examples of Terminal Archaic projectile points (photograph by James Gibb)

At first blush, this thumbnail sketch seems plausible: it accounts for the field data, accords well with geological and climatological models, and conforms to general fission-fusion models that describe historically documented hunter-gatherers. As a model, though, it does not help us understand why many groups in the region eventually adopted pottery and cultivars, or succumbed to invading groups that did. It also rests heavily on external sources—climate change and the formation of a large, biologically rich estuary, and diffusion of broadspear technology—to explain cultural change. And it does not address the apparent contradiction between a cultural horizon of broadspears and more localised and varied projectile points. The model can be construed as materialistic, an unsurprising perspective given the lack of plasticity in the surviving materials with which greater social and ethnic differentiation might have been expressed, a situation comparable to that described by Henson (this volume) for the Mesolithic of north-western Europe. The model also comports with Western concerns of the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries about climate change and community resilience.

The sketch, then, reveals at least two avenues of research that seem extraordinarily difficult to pursue, given the apparent poverty of the archaeological record. Faced with external forces they could not govern, how did indigenous groups alter their ways of life to meet the demands and opportunities of changing ecosystems? And how did these groups contend with both their own increasing populations and those of their neighbours? The first question is materialistic and, perhaps, can be addressed with conventional field and analytical techniques developed since the 1960s (see Renfrew 1973 for a sample of processual approaches). But innumerable sites in the Chesapeake

watershed representing ten millennia or more look a great deal alike: scatters of humanly modified rocks, locally available, across similar landforms. So, perhaps the first question is not so easily answered, unless spatial distributions of specific artefacts provide signatures of past peoples in the absence of temporally diagnostic artefacts. The second question is explicitly historical and resistant to conventional approaches that emphasise lithic technologies, tool-stone sourcing and settlement patterning, rather than the actions of individuals and small groups. The experiment below aims particularly, but not exclusively, at historical issues. It is an effort to translate (*sensu* Patton, this volume) archaeological remains into past human action and, in the process, to evoke humanistic continuities (Given and Henson, this volume).

Parting Time: a vignette

Setting

Mattawoman Creek Valley in northern Charles County, Maryland, approximately 25 km south of Washington, DC, USA. The creek, with numerous small tributaries and associated wetlands, flows west-southwest into the Potomac River, one of five major rivers draining into the Chesapeake Bay. Mattawoman's floodplain varies in width, but in the north-central part of the county it is relatively narrow and level, and dissected uplands overlook the valley from north and south (Figure 8.3). Mixed, but largely deciduous, forests cover most of the landforms; sweet gum (*Liquidambar styraciflua*), poplar (*Liriodendron tulipifera*) and other trees adapted to poorly drained soils occupy the valley, and oaks (*Quercus* spp.), hickory (*Carya* spp.) and beech (*Fagus grandifolia*) trees the uplands. Understorey development is minimal (American holly [*Ilex opaca*] and mountain laurel [*Kalmia latifolia*]) except in forested areas that have been partially cleared through human agency, storm damage or plant disease. Periodic flooding and stormwater erosion expose poorly mixed gravels in some locations.

Figure 8.3 Middle part of Mattawoman Creek and fictional trail between two archaeological sites. Base map data provided courtesy of Charles County (Maryland) government

Characters

Jim: A superannuated, white, male, middle-class field archaeologist, Jim earns his living largely through commercial archaeology (called

cultural resource management in the United States), and has done so for more than 40 years, but remains engaged in academic research through publication and conference participation. He is sufficiently self-aware to know that his self-confidence is misplaced, but nevertheless is given to didacticism, pedantry and scientific chauvinism.

Claudia: A twenty-something-year-old woman of Asian heritage, Claudia is at the beginning of her professional career, exuding the enthusiasm and energy of youth. She knows that she has a lot to learn and steams forward in doing so. She has a healthy scepticism of her elders—too healthy for Jim’s taste.

Indigenous persons of the Terminal Archaic period: visible to Jim and Claudia, they remain invisible to the reader who must rely on our two named protagonists for whatever information on these Native Americans they might glean. In performance, the ‘Native Americans’ may act behind a scrim that excludes specific details of dress and equipage for which we have few or no data.

Scene

Jim and Claudia skirt some moderately dense colonising brush in the floodplain, intermittently scanning the uplands to the south, mentally connecting the two settings. Claudia stumbles on a pile of rocks.

Jim: Nice trip?

Claudia: You put them there!

Jim: Yes I did. And I gave you the capability to see them. Turn up the gain on your unit.

Claudia: I’m about as far into your imagination as I want to go. I’ll chance a virtual broken ankle.

Jim: Fall and break the headset or sensor and...

Claudia: ...and blah, blah, blah...hey!

They have just emerged from thinning brush into a clearing recently vacated by a large group of Native Americans. A whiff of a north-westerly breeze mingles an amalgam of subtle, not-altogether-objectionable odours, with hints of putrefying flesh, to the two explorers.

Jim: Yea, I see it. Stuff all over the place. And I can smell smoke from what’s left of the fires...and look!

Claudia: Can they hear and see us?

Jim: It’s my imagination, what do you think Einstein?

Claudia: Well, I can’t hear them.

Jim: What would you have them say? I don’t speak archaic Algonquian, or Iroquoian,

or Siouan, or whatever the hell language they spoke. Just watch, see what happens. Let's follow...I have them heading south about 1200m up to 18CH921.

Eleven people of varying ages and both sexes have collected bundles and baskets and are beginning to walk southward.

Claudia: Why don't we cut to the chase and meet them up there?

Jim: You know, you are really annoying...be patient. Just watch...ouch! Damned rock pile!

Claudia: You put it there. Perhaps you should sit down before you hurt yourself or the apparatus.

The group halts and begins calling and waving in the direction of the rising late autumn sun. A group of seven, equally burdened, joins them and, after mutual greetings, they continue southward and then up the steep, forested slope to a broad upland flat above a spring, well-wooded but with little understorey. They continue southward for more than 100m where they encounter some brush and scattered fire-cracked rock and quartzite flakes of varying sizes. A quick glance from two of the older women and they appear to signal their intention of going farther. Walking another 100m, they cross the spring and come upon the edge of an upland flat above another spring-fed stream with a southern aspect, a site (18CH921) similar to the one they bypassed (18CH684). Words exchanged, a few gestures, and the group begins to sort itself into two distinct areas a few metres apart.

Claudia: So, you think this accounts for the clustering of lithics and fire-cracked rock we found?

Jim: Yup. And did you notice that little exchange back at the first place they stopped?

Claudia: Yea, those two women took a look at the brush and the surface trash and nixed it.

Jim: Well, occupied before, so it probably wasn't the soil, slope or aspect.

Claudia: Probably figured they used up most of the firewood last season. Did you catch the expression on the face of the older one? Something between being spooked and mildly disgusted. Suppose something spiritual, like it's too soon since last they were here?

Jim: Firewood exhaustion and lingering spirits...you might have that processual/post-processual divide licked! Hey, where are they going?

Claudia: Didn't you just mention firewood?

Jim: Yea, sure; but I didn't...

Claudia: ...the rest of your brain hasn't caught up with your imagination.

Both turn to the east, their attention drawn to two figures moving away from the larger group sorting itself and planning their new, if temporary, home.

Claudia: Bet that dude and the kid are off looking for quartzite pebbles. They have that "I want to make a sharp implement" gleam in their eyes.

Jim: Make a sharp implement for what?

Claudia: The stuff they brought up from the valley looks like it could use some chopping. Maybe they are just desperate for something with which to cut this tale short...?

Jim: Knock it off! [Resignedly] Okay, let's lose the headsets and write up what we have. Think test implications.

Analysis

This is not a treatment prepared for the consideration of television programme producers, nor is it a candidate for the Samuel French catalogue of plays. These few lines simply provide a structured imagining of the movement of a small group of Native Americans from a large riverside encampment to an upland location, joining with another small group en route. The plot device of a virtual reality machine that allows my young colleague to share this well-circumscribed bit of my imaginings is not just a modern twist on the clichéd time machine. H.G. Wells' 'Time Traveller', an eccentric inventor, witnesses events and interacts with people (the Eloi and Morlocks) more than 800,000 years into the future. My fictive invention is far more modest: it creates a virtual reality scenario from my thoughts, although it is subject to subconscious or semiconscious thoughts that intrude on the scenario. There is no pretext of encountering past peoples, and I have stopped well short of putting words into the mouths of the imagined people I am investigating.

The actions I imagined of these people seem to the modern Western liberal eye to be banal and non-derogatory, Claudia's quip about spirituality—or more accurately, the suggestion that I made her character articulate—being a notable exception. It is not out of keeping with ethnographic observations of nonliterate and literate peoples around the world (e.g. many in the United States today express discomfort in the presence of cemeteries and revulsion at the sight of recent trash on the ground), although individuals with an unwavering commitment to defining the world in terms of measureable phenomena might find offensive the suggestion that these characters made a decision on the basis of an intuited, intangible presence. I cannot do anything about that and still generate test implications from scenarios. No known culture recognises only material phenomena.

From a methodological perspective, we leave Jim and Claudia as they are disconnecting from the apparatus, before they assemble their

observations and start considering what the archaeological manifestations might be of the behaviours I imagined. One phenomenon, however, can be isolated as an example of how scene writing might aid research. As noted in the background section above, archaeological surveys often encounter sites likely occupied during the Terminal Archaic along the edges of uplands overlooking stream valleys. Scatters of lithic debitage, usually quartzite or quartz in statistically significant unequal numbers, with a few fire-cracked rocks occur on small promontories separated by drainages and a few scores of metres. Each site archaeologically looks like a single occupation or a very few repeated occupations. The possibility that a group might avoid recently abandoned sites because of debris, depleted firewood and colonising vegetation—and possibly because of uneasiness or specific cultural rules—should be considered in analysing settlement systems that include such sites. The micronarrative (Savani & Thompson, this volume) or microstory (Ripanti & Osti, this volume) presented above suggests both how groups may have experienced previously occupied sites and how they may have retained a degree of social differentiation spatially after fissioning into smaller groups.

The scenario also raises the prospect of small groups coming together (fusion) in a process researchers categorically define as fission. That is, the breakup of seasonal aggregations could involve smaller groups recombining, perhaps from separate aggregation sites, as they seek and occupy smaller, shorter-term sites. The scene implies that they come from two different floodplain settlements, but they as easily could have come from different parts of the same settlement and maintained their group cohesion and identity when they established themselves on the upland edge. Upland scatters of flaked stone and fire-cracked rock often exhibit spatial clustering of material suggestive of social differentiation by household. Others—the very smallest in terms of size (under 20m in diameter) and number and diversity of artefacts—could represent small groups that did not unite with others, or that fissioned later in the year from an upland settlement.

These ‘observations’, if we can call ideas derived from imagined scenarios observations, suggest the value of approaching Terminal Archaic sites in different ways. Is there spatial clustering of material, even on sites of such low density as to preclude cost-effective, intensive investigation? And, if so, are the contents of each cluster statistically similar? Can we discern statistically significant differences between patterns that appear to represent neighbouring households?

What are the testable implications of a single occupation as opposed to multiple occupations? Are statistics even applicable on such low-density sites? Perhaps an adequate investigation of 18CH684 (the Smithsonian trinomial registration number based on state [18 for Maryland], county [Charles], and the *n*th site registered for that jurisdiction) requires statistical comparisons with assemblages from neighbouring sites: the nearby upland flake and fire-cracked rock scatter (18CH921) and the larger settlement along a relict stream (18CH884). Without such detailed context, they lack anthropological and historical significance: they are 'redundant resources', in the parlance of American cultural resource management, virtually identical to other finds in the region, and therefore offering no insight into the past; hence, warranting no further investigation and no extraordinary preservation effort.

Another issue indirectly broached by the scene, and highlighted by an investigation of two additional upland Terminal Archaic sites (18CH935 and 18CH937) conducted subsequent to writing it, is the size of the two imagined groups. How large of an archaeologically discernible footprint would a group of 18 have left, especially if they formed two spatially discrete occupations? For decades, the standard approach to site discovery in the US Eastern Woodlands has been excavation of shovel test pits on orthogonal grids at intervals of 50–65ft (or 15–20m). The 20m interval was adopted in the 1970s, the reasoning being that no occupation would be less than 20m in diameter; hence, there was a good chance of at least one shovel test occurring within that circle. But a site consisting of two or more residential clusters of very small groups could result in extensive 'empty' spaces. Without the homogenising effects of ploughing (to which these sites on the very edges of upland finger terraces may not have been subjected), concentrations of material could be missed and, by extension, the residential clusters they represent.

Testing at the two immediately aforementioned sites appears to have encountered that problem: close-interval (32.5ft/10m) shovel testing revealed six to eight clusters of flaked stone, fire-cracked rock or combinations of both when the data were subjected to trend surface analysis with the aid of a kriging algorithm used by Surfer® software. The programme interpolates values between test units and then generates contour lines within parameters established by the analyst. In every one of the 14 clusters revealed by the analysis, results from a single shovel test formed the cluster without any contributions from neighbouring shovel tests. Moreover, testing six clusters at each site

with one or two 3ft (1m) excavation units yielded varying numbers of artefacts ranging from three to nearly 2,000 from deposits of 10cm thickness or less. My assessment of these findings, informed by the above scene, is that the resolution of our testing is inadequate for investigating the resolution of the behavioural residues left by the sites' occupants. Oops! North American archaeologists will have to modify long-standing practices to realise the research value of such sites that we typically dismiss as 'not historically significant' because they lack data that 'has yielded or is likely to yield information important to history'.

A final note about the specific scene related above: I have not fully exploited its value because of its current form: a series of lines of dialogue interspersed with some details of setting. The value in my first two experiments at the London Town site was realised through performance, in each instance the actors bringing their analytical and dramatic talents to bear, illuminating aspects of behaviour and setting that I had not envisioned. Even the two Port Tobacco vignettes, which were not produced in a conventional sense, offered insights beyond the texts because each was performed by a group of actors in the manner of a radio play (<https://upcolorado.com/component/k2/item/2712-subjects-and-narratives-in-archaeology-media#chapter-7-audio>). The scene above has played out only in my imagination and, therefore, is limited by the limits of my imagination, experience and perspective.

Discussion

I set as my task the application of a quintessentially humanistic activity—playwriting—to a scientific problem that broadly comes under the rubric of environmental archaeology: how did an aboriginal people adapt socially and economically to the Chesapeake ecosystem 3,000 years ago within the constraints of increasing aridity and an expanding estuary? Conventional methods of spatially analysing distributions of a small number of artefact classes (flaked stone and fire-cracked rock) within sites, and of contemporaneous sites across two principal landforms (floodplains and upland edges) offered some insights, but the approaches and research value of the sites appeared to be exhausted. Could a literary art form, in the absence of information on aboriginal symbolic expression and events, reimagine these sites and their constituent materials in ways that lead to reapplication of those conventional scientific methods? The analysis of

the scene reveals a categorical answer: maybe.

Here are what I perceive to be the successes and failures of the experiment:

- 1.This is the first attempt, of which I am aware, of developing people—and even a couple of partial personalities—beyond scatters of rocks and such appellations as ‘the Late Archaic’, ‘aboriginal peoples’ (a phrase I overuse), and ‘hunter/gatherers’. But it is far from the imaginable—never mind the demonstrable—characteristics of the people I purport to study. There is a struggle for, but failure to achieve, empathy.
- 2.Even the brief examination of spatial patterning suggests that Terminal Archaic upland sites can reveal significant sociological/anthropological data that will contribute to our understanding of how our culturally and temporally remote cousins adapted to ecological constraints through decision-making informed by culture and experience. But this experiment has failed to explore these data, and not solely because of its brevity: the necessary analytical tools have not been advanced.
- 3.Analysis of this handful of sites reveals the current limitations of conventional archaeological methods in exploring the internal structure of Terminal Archaic sites and suggests the prospect of dating sites by internal structure rather than reliance on the recovery of temporally diagnostic projectile points. But the playwriting method has not suggested how those conventional archaeological methods might be improved, apart from recovering higher-resolution data, that is, digging more and larger test units closer together. The stock summary might be, ‘more work needs to be done’.

Allowable chapter length and limits placed by commerce on resources (my time and the ability to more intensively investigate sites that agencies typically deem insignificant) constrain this particular experiment, but the initial results seem encouraging. The method may be as successfully applied to the archaeological sites of ‘silent’ peoples as to those for which we have rich documentary resources, but it clearly poses greater challenges. Those challenges are less ethical than technical, and perhaps require greater imagination, writing skill and archaeological testing than I can muster. But the prospect is there and, if the alternative is to accept the limitations of conventional data and regard the research potential of upland Terminal Archaic sites as

exhausted, then a humanistic perspective coupled with that of science is certainly worth exploring.

I have suggested that playwriting, and the literary and performance arts in general, can help where conventional approaches fail (Gibb 2003, 2015). To be clear, I am not suggesting that we substitute the humanities for science. The contributions to this volume, perhaps without exception, are humanities focused, but none exclude conventional scientific approaches, and I think all of the authors see their efforts as contributing to a deeper knowledge and appreciation for past peoples and their histories and cultures. The authors have not succeeded in offering a comprehensive humanities-science approach to the study of the past; that was not our brief and such a product would be premature. Much remains to explore in terms of ethics, methods and epistemology. But it is not premature to examine the (re-)unification of these two broad fields of scholarship, and this experiment suggests an opportunity.

Acknowledgements

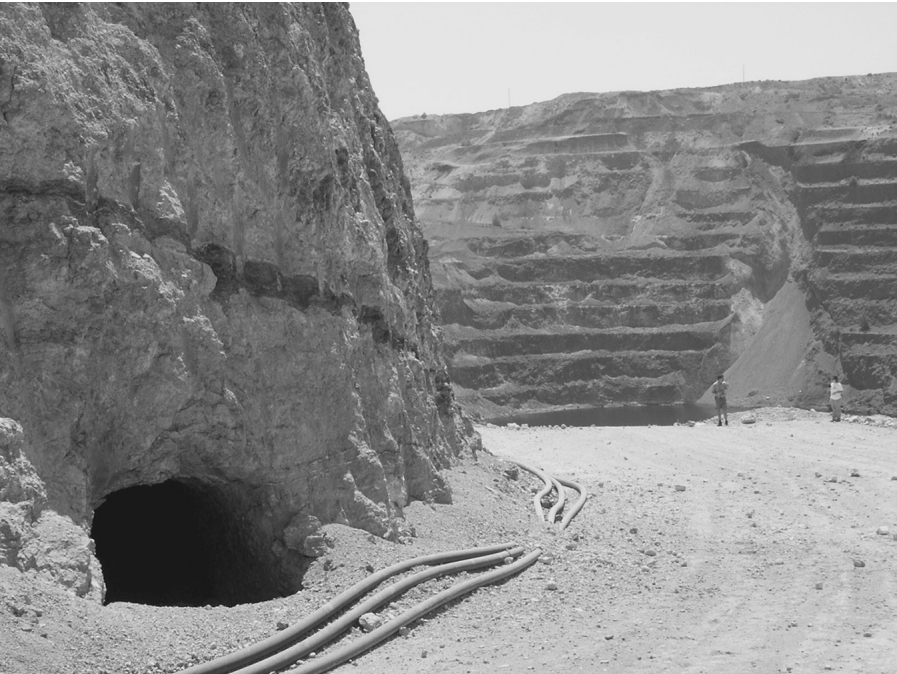
Daan and Rob, by inviting me to participate in the symposium from which this paper and this volume have emerged, gave me the excuse I needed to further explore playwriting as a research tool and, specifically, to test it on sites for which there is no large body of characters, events and conflicting worldviews from which to draw material. Thank you both. Thanks also to the participants in the session for sharing their ideas, many of which clarified my own or sent me along unexpected paths. I drew the character *Claudia* from a real-life colleague, but out of respect for that person's privacy and wishes, the identity will remain unrevealed. Finally, per my suggestion in the first part of the paper, all errors of omission and commission, and all misrepresentations of the past, are my responsibility. To my subjects, I thank you for what you have left me and apologise for any harm that I unwillingly might have committed to your reputations and legacy. I know that I have come uninvited into your society, and hope that I might have been well received as I have tried to learn about you.

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9Encountering the past through slag and storytelling

Michael Given

Introduction

One hot summer about 15 years ago, an archaeologist was working on the edge of a huge modern copper mine in Cyprus, plotting the distribution of ancient pottery, figuring out the broader context and trying to help his archaeometallurgical colleagues with the recording of a massive Late Roman slag heap. Perhaps it was the heat, or perhaps he ended up thinking about slag more than was good for him, but, whatever the cause, he suddenly realised that he had lost all confidence in what he was doing. His pottery distribution maps looked abstract and irrelevant, his contextual analysis was impossibly distant from any real human lives, and his accounts of the organisation of Roman copper mining seemed both meaningless and dull.

There being few other genuine options available, he kept going. As tends to happen during archaeological survey, he met all sorts of different and interesting people who lived and worked round about

the copper mine. They told him a bewildering variety of stories about their lives and what had happened in their landscapes. And that made him begin to think rather differently about what he was doing. Perhaps all the maps, section drawings and contextual analyses did not tell the whole story. So he decided that he would try to find new ways that did.

Fifteen years later, I have told that story and others in various different venues, ranging from lecture theatres and conference sessions to village halls and school classrooms. And this experience has indeed made me think differently. Telling a story about Roman copper mining, for example, has directly impacted the formal and rather theoretical academic paper that I wrote about slag (Given 2018b). Archaeologists see slag as a proxy for a complex technical process, but what did the miners and smelters think about it? Slave labour in Roman copper mines was clearly cruel and oppressive, but how did that play out in the experiences of particular individuals in particular mining galleries?

Below I have done my best to translate that story, originally presented orally at a conference, into the written word. Much has been lost: that immediate rapport that can build up between teller and listener, the atmosphere of the room, the collective engagement of the audience, the terracotta oil lamp suddenly pulled out of a pocket to illustrate the narrative, the clear anguish in the archaeologist-storyteller's voice as he finds himself in a position his academic upbringing cannot deal with. But narrative that is written and read can be a powerful medium too, communicating a sense of place, an engagement with material culture and a compelling interpretation of the past.

So here is the story. A few people have asked if it is true, and many more have clearly wanted to ask. My answer to them is simple: it is a story; it has many truths. After the story, I will return to my academic voice, give some facts, data and references, and then reflect on how useful storytelling can be for archaeological and academic practice.

Slag: the story

A few years ago, I was working in the intense sun of a Cypriot summer, helping my colleagues record and map a Roman slag heap. It was vast: 330m long, between 10 and 50m wide, and up to 18m high. This was the Skouriotissa slag heap, evidence of the huge scale of the copper mining and smelting operation that took place during the

Roman and Late Roman periods on Cyprus. This slag heap was the centrepiece of our research into ancient copper mining, as part of the Troodos Archaeological and Environmental Survey Project (Figure 9.1).

Figure 9.1 Section through part of the Roman-period slag heap at Skouriotissa, 26 July 2005 (photograph by Michael Given)

Covered in sweat and black dust from the slag, we drew the layers, took samples of slag and pottery, identified workshop floors and used a total station to take points for a contour map. We were gradually working out the sequence of smelting operations: ore, flux and charcoal went into the clay furnaces; when the smelt was finished the slag was tapped out through a hole in the side; the furnace was broken open to extract the lump of ‘matte’ or impure, unrefined copper; the slag cake and the remains of the furnace were smashed up and levelled to provide a new working floor; and the whole process started again. The more we scrutinised the face of the slag heap, the more we were able to spot the successive layers of slag, the workshop floors and the pieces of charcoal, some of which still revealed the tree branches from which they were made. It didn’t help us that every ten minutes we were covered in the choking dust that billowed along behind the huge trucks of the modern mining operation, which were carrying ore from the open-cast pit up on the mountain down to the leaching piles below.

Just as I was holding my breath for another of the trucks to pass, it juddered and crashed to a halt beside me. Its dust-covered driver opened the hatch and climbed down the ladder from his driving cab. It towered above him, the top of the front wheel higher than his head. As he turned towards me, I saw the streaks of dust and sweat on his gaunt face. He removed his goggles to show white rings round dark, intense eyes that peered suspiciously at me, screwed up against the harsh light.

He gestured towards the slag heap and gave the characteristic Cypriot turn of the finger and shake of the head that means, ‘What are you doing? Explain yourself!’ I began telling him about the slag heap, and why we were recording it. In the Roman and Early Byzantine periods, Cyprus was one of the largest producers of copper in the Mediterranean, I said, trying to impress him, and this was by far and away the biggest operation on the island. The copper that came from here, leaving this enormous pile of slag, went on to make up bronze coins and statues across the entire empire. But he flapped his hand at

me and strode towards the face of the heap. He gestured at a slag cake, and with the same turn of his finger asked silently what it was.

Again, I explained. It was the waste product from the smelting, I said, and it contained the rock and metals such as iron and manganese that did not go into the ingot of unrefined copper. The slag also contained a tiny amount of copper: by the Late Roman period the process was so efficient that the slag usually contained less than 1 per cent of the metal. When the workers judged that the smelt was finished, they drilled a hole in the side of the clay furnace. The molten slag trickled out and solidified, hence the strange dribbles on the surface of the slag cake that the old man was crouching over.

Once again, he interrupted me, suddenly jabbing his finger at the surface of the slag cake. "Blood", he hissed. "It is blood, and flesh, and sweat". He stood up and glared at me. I stared blankly back at him. "You do not believe me. I will show you". He turned and pointed to the modern mine towering above us. "Sunday. The top of the mine. The middle of the day. I will show you". Without waiting for a response, he scrambled up the ladder back into his driving cab, and with a snarl of its diesel engine the huge truck lumbered off down the road, the ore crashing and rumbling as the truck hit the pot holes.

I had to get back to work, and, perhaps fortunately, my colleagues had not stopped to listen or watch what the old man was doing. They were excited by some particularly well-preserved fragments of pottery that they were finding in several layers of the slag heap. These showed us that most of the copper production happened in the fifth to seventh centuries *ad*. According to our Roman pottery specialist, these fragments of tiles and amphorae belonged to exactly the same types that our survey teams were finding at a whole series of small sites in the valley and plains around the mine. Miners had to eat, of course. Were these small sites in fact the farmsteads and agricultural estates that produced grain and olive oil for the miners? It would make sense that both the mine and its agricultural suppliers used the same tile and pottery manufacturers.

These preliminary ideas and theories gave me lots to think about, but as the rest of the week went by, I kept wondering about what the old man had said. I'd look at a slag cake, with its dribbles of molten slag suddenly frozen as they ran out the hole tapped in the side of the furnace. What actually was this stuff? Iron oxide, silica, sulphur, manganese, some residual copper and trace elements of zinc and barium, as my archaeometallurgist colleagues told me? Or were there other, more human, trace elements that the chemical wizardry of the

XRF back in the lab couldn't detect?

When it came to the agreed time, of course, I couldn't resist going to the mine to see what he had to show me. On Sundays the mine is closed, and there is nothing to stop you driving up, provided you keep out of sight of the Greek Cypriot National Guard observation posts looking northwards across the United Nations Buffer Zone. By midday on Sunday, after some careful navigation, I was walking through the outlandish colours of the modern mine, towards the huge open cast pit (Figure 9.2). Reminding myself of what I had learnt from our archaeometallurgists, I tried to identify what I saw: the glistening greenish-grey of the ore in the side of the pit; the outcrops of yellow ochre, used as a flux to lower the melting point of the copper; the splashes of orange and rust-red from the oxidised iron that told the ancient prospectors where the copper-bearing chalcopyrite ore lay underneath. The air was hot and dry, the mine a barren chemical kaleidoscope that seemed remote from the lives and stories of individual humans.

Figure 9.2 The open cast pit at Skouriotissa copper mine, 26 July 2005
(photograph by Michael Given)

There was no sign of the old man, so I walked a little way along the edge of the pit. I had been in the mine before, though unlike now that had been an 'official' visit. We had found out that the miners had discovered a huge mass of ancient amphora fragments while they were extending the open-cast pit. We asked the manager of the mine about it, and although they had been dumped in an inaccessible area, he kindly arranged for a couple of bucket loads to be brought round to the back of the mining headquarters for us to look at. Mining engineers think big: those two 'bucket loads' turned out to be 21m³ of Roman amphora sherds, stained yellow from their centuries in the copper mine. Clearly ancient miners thought on a large scale as well. What were they doing with such vast numbers of these bulbous two-handled pots, normally used for transporting olive oil, wine or water? Our Roman pottery specialist worked out that they were of only two different types, probably locally made, though she had identified the same types in some neighbouring agricultural sites. Could they be for bringing in water for the miners? For bailing out the mine? Either way, goatskins would seem to be lighter and more suitable.

As I walked to and fro, I began to notice that every now and then there was a tunnel going into the ore body (Figure 9.3). The miners of the first half of the twentieth century who had dug the open-cast pit

didn't use such galleries, so these must be earlier. Could they be contemporaneous with our Roman slag heap? I looked round, wondering about the chronology, and saw that the old man had suddenly appeared in the mouth of one of the galleries. He stood motionless, staring intently at me as if he had been watching me. In his hand he held what was quite clearly a Roman oil lamp, the tiny flame from its coarse string wick almost invisible in the sunlight. Without a word, he turned and vanished into the gallery.

*Figure 9.3*Skouriotissa mine with adit, 13 July 2003 (photograph by Michael Given)

I had no way of knowing whether the gallery was safe. I had no hard hat and no torch—and neither did the old man, clearly. No one knew where I was. But my own health and safety briefings vanished from my head as I turned to follow him, and the next thing I knew I was bent double, following him into the dark tunnel. The walls at first were ochre and rust-coloured with the iron oxides, but soon there were bands of the green-grey chalcopyrite that formed the long sought-after copper ore. The heat was intense, the air sulphurous and stifling. I stumbled along, treading in the flickering shadow cast by the old man with the oil lamp held in front of him.

Abruptly, he stopped. He turned and hissed, "Listen! You must listen!" I stopped, and tried to quieten my breathing. Nothing. "You must listen!", he repeated. He picked up a handful of dust and ore fragments from the floor and let it slide through his fingers. It trickled and rattled faintly onto the rock floor. "If you hear that, you must get out".

He continued on, and soon we began to pass wooden pit props every couple of metres, preserved beautifully in the acid conditions of the mine. My first thought was, "Dendrochronology!" They had to be Roman, and contemporaneous with our slag heap; it would be wonderful to take a section of one. But once again he hissed, "Listen!" He tapped a pit prop with his knuckles. It made a dull, solid knocking. "When you hear them creaking, you must get out".

We continued our slow progress into the mountain. One stretch had no pit props; perhaps the ancient miners had decided the rock was more solid. The old man picked up a lump of ore from the ground and hammered it briefly against the ceiling. It made a hard, strong thudding noise. He nodded. "That is good. When it echoes, you must get out". But a sudden change came over his face, in the dull glow of the oil lamp he held below him, deepening the lines each side of his

mouth and casting his eyes into pools of darkness that shifted and danced in the flickering of the tiny flame. "Sometimes you hear it through the mountain", he whispered. "It thunders, and you do not know where in the mountain it is. Then a long rumbling". He pushed his face angrily into mine, his eyes invisible in his own shadow. "And you know what they take out of the mine when that happens, after you hear that rumbling in another tunnel?" He spat on the ore-flecked ground. "*Haima kai kreas*. Blood and flesh, and the hands and legs of miners. That is your slag, your copper, your bronze coins and statues. *Haima kai kreas*. Blood and flesh". He looked forwards to where the pit props started again and cried out in a sudden anguish, "How can a timber hold up a mountain?"

I said nothing. We continued on our way. Once again, he stopped, and put his hand down to pick up something from the floor. I looked into the little pool of lamplight and recognised immediately what it was. The old man turned the yellow-stained lump of pottery slowly over in his hand. It was the strengthened toe of an amphora, I saw, where it came to a point at the bottom. "These were the worst", he whispered. The anger came back into his voice. "All because of those fancy doctors and rich city patients who wanted their foul medicine, their copper salts and vitriols". He swallowed and bowed his head for a minute without speaking. When he resumed, it was in a low, flat voice.

"There was a tunnel, a deep one. At the bottom the water was warm and yellow, and it stank. The poison in the air put out the lamps, and we could not breathe, and it was so hot we could wear nothing. So we had to run, run bent over, as fast as we could, so we could get out again and breathe, and carry this huge heavy jar, and fill it with the poison, and run back again carrying it".

His eyes widened as he saw again the rows of amphorae, the yellow stinking water, the oil lamps extinguished in their little niches in the rock. "We could not breathe!" he cried. Suddenly he was fighting me, grappling with me, and it took me a moment of panic before I realised he was struggling to get past me in a panic of fear and memory. I crouched on the floor, and he scrambled across me and fled back towards the daylight, bent double, his long cry echoing down the gallery behind him.

I groped in front of me and put my hand into a little puddle of oil. Beside it was his lamp, but it had gone out and there was no way of

relighting it. I picked my way slowly and painfully back along the gallery, and finally emerged into the blinding sunlight. There was no sign of the old man, and I never saw him again.

The next day, I worked on the face of the slag heap with my colleagues, listening to them argue about sampling strategies and trying to figure out the complex stratigraphy. This was essential, I thought, if you're going to understand an ancient copper mine. You need the stratigraphy, the chemistry, the geology, the pottery and all the rest of it. But there was more to it than that. Slag was made of more than iron oxide and magnesium. As I worked, I couldn't help looking at the strange dribbly texture of the slag cakes (Figure 9.4). "Blood and sweat", I thought, and, "You must listen".

Figure 9.4 Slag cake from Skouriotissa, approximately 60cm wide, showing the solidified dribbles of molten slag tapped out of the furnace (starting from the edge at the bottom of the photograph), 6 August 2001 (photograph by Chris Parks)

The facts?

The massive Late Roman slag heap at Skouriotissa had some two million tons of slag, almost all of it dating from the fourth to seventh centuries ad. Its structure, stratigraphy and composition were meticulously recorded and analysed by Vasiliki Kassianidou and her team of archaeometallurgists, and integrated with the results of the surface survey, artefact analysis and mapping, and the historical and archival information (Boutin et al. 2013: 114–38; Georgakopoulou & Kassianidou 2013). The analysis carried out by our Roman pottery specialist, Kristina Winther-Jacobsen, was particularly important (Boutin et al. 2013: 118–33). There are many Roman-period adits and galleries that have been sectioned by modern mining operations at Skouriotissa and elsewhere in Cyprus (Boutin et al. 2013: 117–18; Graham et al. 2013: 172–77; Van Lokeren et al. 2003: 168–75).

One of the most remarkable finds at Skouriotissa was an enormous deposit of broken amphorae encrusted with copper salts, virtually all of them of two local types dating to the second century ad. The 'small' sample that the mining company gave us came to 21m³ (Figure 9.5). Of the various possible explanations for this deposit, the most likely is that the amphorae were used for the collection, from sumps within the mine, of water full of copper salts valued for their medical properties (Jacobsen 2007; Boutin et al. 2013: 118–20).

The best evidence for the use of these amphorae is from a passage written by the Roman physician Galen when he visited either Skouriotissa or the neighbouring mine of Mavrovouni in ad 166:

But to me all the times I descended to the end of the tunnel where the warm and green yellowish water was collected, the smell of the air which smelled of khalkitis and copper rust seemed to me to be stifling and oppressive. The taste of the water was the same. The naked slaves brought up the amphorae running and they could not stand to stay there for a long time, but quickly ascended.

(Galen *De Temp. Fac. Simp. Med.* 9, in Wallace & Orphanides 1990: 227)

My character's anguished cry, 'How can a timber hold up a mountain?' is a quote from a compelling and dramatic narrative by a Virginian third-generation coal miner, Earl E. Scott (Harvey 2005). Earl could discern and interpret "the voices of the mines that 'speak' a series of warnings", particularly through the tapping of the roof and the answer to that tapping given by the mine (ibid.: 75–76). The role of listening in my story is not just an essential survival technique for a miner: it is also a central theme in the narrator's growing ability to approach the otherness of a different culture. For an archaeological storyteller, listening is the key to the success.

Storytelling and archaeology

As archaeologists, we communicate what we think about the past. We inform, persuade, argue, justify, challenge, engage and sometimes shock. Academic writing and speaking can be blunt tools with which to achieve this. We are so determined to show our sources and reasoning that we end up distancing ourselves and our audience from the past people and societies with whom we are trying to engage. So often our writing ends up being "dry, uninspired, uninspiring, uncreative, unimaginative, cold, inhuman, perverse" (Boivin 1997: 106). Compare that to the power of storytelling; think of that magical moment when a deep silence suddenly falls upon the room, with everyone utterly focused on you and your story. This gives the archaeologist-storyteller power—and responsibility.

A story is a challenge to an archaeological author: we are forced to

face up to the questions we usually ignore. What did people wear? What was it really like to smelt copper? How long each day did they work? What did they eat? Who did the cooking? What did they think of this pot, this building, this copper mine, this cake of slag? What were the adventures of this oil lamp during its long life? These questions, so familiar to the historical novelist, are all too easily pushed aside by the academic archaeologist as extraneous and irrelevant to the research questions (Ripanti & Osti, this volume).

But what about the facts? You can't just make things up!

Even facts can be conveyed by stories. This is one of the responsibilities of the storytelling archaeologist: to communicate and interpret the data rigorously and fairly. The deciding issue here is not the medium. Academic works can be grossly incorrect or even counterfactual (a thought experiment, for example), while historical fiction can be scrupulously researched with their artefacts and buildings based firmly on surviving examples (as in the novels of one of contributors to this volume, Victoria Thompson, published under the name V.M. Whitworth; see also Wickham-Jones, this volume). There are clearly risks that a storyteller or novelist will not be responsible or rigorous in their use of the material evidence for the past. But the same applies to academic writing: there is a risk that the allure of the hypothesis will sweep counter-evidence under the carpet, or that there will be gaps in the evidence, or a systematic cultural or disciplinary bias. What matters is the author of both fiction and academic writing taking responsibility for their material and building up their authority in their story or text so that readers and listeners will trust them. One way of doing this, of course, is by using references. Another is an appendix that explains the archaeological evidence. My story here uses both.

But even if the oil lamp is based on an artefact, it's still just a story!

As any parent knows, there is no such thing as 'just' a story. Fiction can be a powerful medium for the communication of truths. That is why it is 'necessary', not just a vehicle for entertainment. Fiction can set up new understandings, new paradigms, whole new worlds for playing, thinking and learning. Do you want to come to terms with the inherent slipperiness of language and meaning? Read James Joyce's *Ulysses*. Do you want to brainstorm on the ultimate result of rampant capitalism and the genetic modification of food? Read Paolo

Bacigalupi's *The Windup Girl*. Do you want to immerse yourself in the social fabric of Anglo-Saxon England? Read V.M. Whitworth's *Wulfgar* novels. It is on this level of understanding that archaeology at its most interesting operates—engaging with the situations, challenges, dilemmas and experiences of past communities—and in that way contributes to thinking about our own society (see also Elphinstone, this volume).

Towards a theory and methodology of archaeological storytelling

Reflecting on the sudden and dramatic growth of storytelling within historical archaeology in North America in the late 1990s, James G. Gibb (2000: 2) observed the prevalent misunderstanding of archaeological storytelling, deriving from the widely maintained dichotomy between scientist and populariser, report and story. The same dichotomies and misunderstandings survive today: stories are a nice way of communicating your 'results' to the general public, particularly children, but they have no place in academic analysis. Gibb stresses the need for a theoretical framework for archaeological storytelling in order to address these misunderstandings (ibid.: 2). He notes how putting together a story can suggest new or overlooked patterns, relationships and subtleties in the material we study, such as the role of ethnicity in personal relationships (ibid.: 3–5). Telling stories allows the archaeologist to experiment with ideas and interpretation (see Gibb, this volume).

This capacity is unquestionable. My story above challenged me to think through new possibilities about what an apparently innocent slag cake meant to the miners or smelters that produced it. It made me try and connect Galen's description and the artefacts and structures that we were studying to the miners themselves. With the help of Earl E. Scott's own story, I felt compelled to translate the mining galleries, pit props, amphora sherds and slag cakes into human experience. The powerful medium that constitutes storytelling then allowed me to communicate something of that experience to my audience.

For me, however, telling a story is much more than a stimulus for generating new ideas and hypotheses that can then be 'tested' against the data (Gibb 2000: 3). Storytelling is what makes the past relevant today. It is a bridge between the concerns of past communities (e.g. oppressive conditions in the mines) and those of present communities (e.g. ethical supply chains). It deploys tools such as irony, surprise,

identification with the protagonist and emotional reactions to the events portrayed, and uses them to challenge assumptions about how the world works and how humans relate to one other.

There is always the risk, of course, of projecting our contemporary values and interpretations onto our subject matter, thus 'colonising the past' (see Gibb and van Helden & Witcher, this volume). This is demonstrated, for example, in the widespread assumption that emotions are universal and so provide a direct link between us and the individuals and characters of the past, thus driving the widespread success of historical fiction and drama (cf. Tarlow 2012: 171 and Elphinstone, this volume). I would argue that a well-crafted archaeological story can raise and explore these issues and problems, precisely by highlighting the difference between the modern storyteller and the ancient protagonist. The narrator of my story, for example, clearly starts off with a very different attitude to slag than the truck driver. Even if the story fails to approach an ancient understanding of the meaning of slag, it has enabled a discussion of the difficulty of attributing emotional attachment to apparently discarded material.

The point about storytelling that introduces specific human characters into our narratives about the past is that it embraces the role of contingency in the trajectories of human lives and communities. By doing this it acknowledges the power and agency of that historical player who is so often excluded by the neat patterns, models and structures created by the academic. Storytelling allows people to be actors in the whole drama of deliberation and choice that constitutes human society (Carr 2001: 163).

Perhaps most importantly, storytelling can help dissipate the old myth of 'field archaeologist as hero', which has played such a key role in the entanglement of archaeology with class structures and colonialism (Berggren & Hodder 2003: 421–24; Given 2004: 23). Survey archaeologists—in my own experience, at least—are not masters of all they survey, nor do they spring fully informed from the head of Zeus. In my persona as narrator of the story above, I have doubts, uncertainties and considerable ignorance. It was only thanks to my chance encounter with an old man that I could come to a new understanding of the material in which I thought I was a 'specialist'. Storytelling, as an outward-facing stance held by the archaeologist, can contribute strongly to the increasingly prominent paradigm of collaborative and co-produced archaeology (McAnany & Rowe 2015; Hale et al. 2017).

The encounter with ‘strangers in the landscape’ (Given & Seretis 2003), resulting in dialogue and storytelling by both sides, is one of the greatest challenges to insular and rarified academic paradigms, and has been transformational in my own work with landscape (e.g. see discussion of mud-brick architecture, Given 2018a). When the farmer or truck driver comes up to you and demands with a little turn of their finger that you explain yourself, you become a storyteller yourself, then you listen to their story, and as a direct result of that you begin to rethink your own story afresh. To stand on a mountaintop with a fire lookout who is also a village elder and tradition-bearer and to hear the stories of his youth in the forests around you is to rethink the infinitely complex interaction between land and people that constitutes landscape. To expel all that from your academic narrative is to be deaf and blind to the very landscape that you are trying to understand and communicate.

Like any other archaeological technique, storytelling needs an explicit and thought-out methodology. In my early experiments in archaeological storytelling I talked in the voice of the historical character. The audience reaction was hard to pin down, but I felt uncomfortable, not just with academic audiences but also when talking to local history societies, which tend to expect authoritative, academic discourse and feel cheated if they receive anything less than that. I am an archaeologist: I do not have the authority of a Roman copper miner or an Egyptian mule driver, and the attempt to claim it was always going to be unconvincing.

To address that, I took on a new voice: that of a survey archaeologist who keeps on having encounters with strangers (with the emphasis on ‘strange’). This is, of course, entirely true: it is one of the most stimulating and enjoyable features of archaeological survey. The truth of this and my hopefully evident experience made it very easy to establish my own authority and persona as a storyteller. It also made it very easy to use slides to illustrate the stories; that is what archaeologists do, after all, unlike Roman copper miners or mule drivers.

After telling some five stories of my encounters with the past, I began to realise that each encounter was with the same old man, the one who appears here as a truck driver with a long memory. He has even acquired a name, Hermon, though he does not give it in this story. He cropped up in Roman-period Karanis in Egypt as a mule driver. He was a Roman-period cart driver supplying the quarries of Aphrodisias in Turkey, and a miller in Cyprus during the Ottoman

period. He even appeared in the Norse phases of Jarlshof in Shetland, where the manic frenzy fuelled by his own past reached heights never since surpassed. Through his obsessions and compulsive memories, Hermon has become a vehicle for my own attempts to move and communicate between present and past.

As I hope my section on 'The facts?' above showed, the material, landscape and interpretation in the story is as solidly based on archaeological, historical and archaeometallurgical evidence as any academic account. In terms of plot, the transformation of understanding and perception in the narrator is entirely true to life. After all, the results and conclusions of survey archaeology derive from the archaeologist's experience in the landscape, in the widest possible sense.

Conclusions

For those of us concerned with understanding and communicating the past, whether archaeologists, historians, novelists or storytellers, finding fruitful ways of moving between present and past is our key challenge. All of these different approaches can set up barriers instead of bridges, whether made of academic jargon, data overload or the superficial projection of contemporary values. We can make the material culture and human lives of the past remote and abstract, or we can oversimplify them into pale reflections of our unoriginal selves.

Alternatively, we can face up to the responsibilities of the author, whether that means a writer of scholarship or of fiction, or both. We can strive to listen thoughtfully to people and data; we can engage ourselves and others with the particularity and contingency of the past; and we can work to communicate new ideas and understandings in as effective and stimulating a way as possible, regardless of the barriers that are still being built around our disciplines and the past.

Archaeological fiction in written form can do all of this, but by its very nature there is a distancing between author and reader. Because of the direct engagement and mutual listening between teller and audience, storytelling can build sharing and communication into its very structure and medium. By doing so, it can enact the same collaboration and mutual dependency that it narrates.

The character Hermon expresses the encounter that lies at the heart of archaeological interpretation. Like his almost-namesake, Hermes the messenger god, he bridges the yawning gap that lies not just

between the archaeologist and their audience but also that between the archaeologist and the past. We all need our messengers, whether they are gods of data, hermeneutics or narrative. For me, the messengers are my encounters with a whole range of women and men like Hermon, who make me think differently about the landscape and the past. My archaeological data and their lives and experiences together build the bridges on which we can all meet and stand together—and tell each other stories.

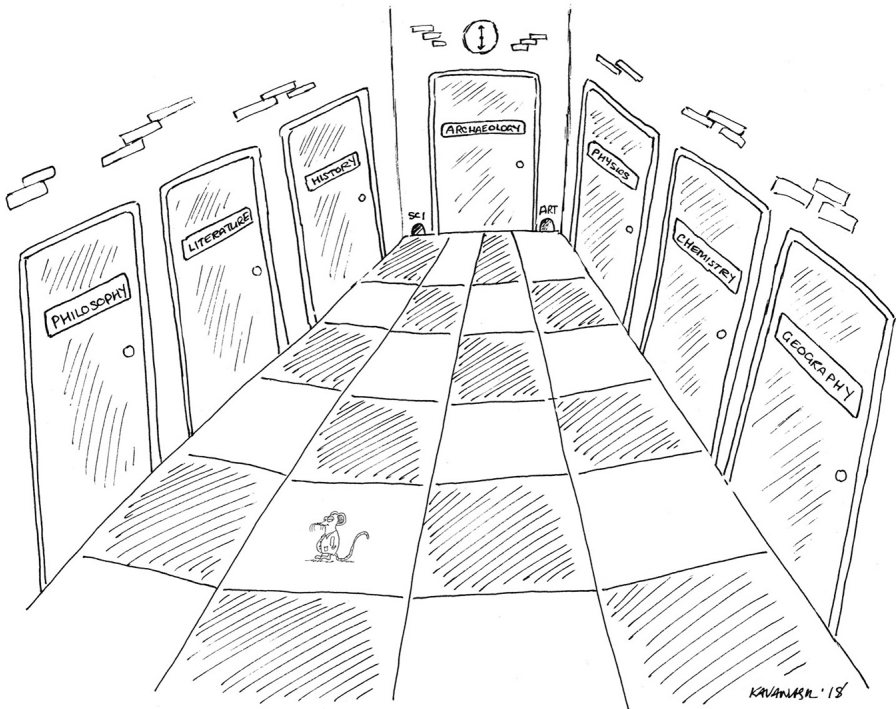
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10Writing wonders

Poetry as archaeological method?

Erin Kavanagh

Introduction

When I first mooted to colleagues the notion of fiction as a mode of archaeological investigation, I was met with some bewilderment,

particularly when I mentioned the addition of poetics. The practices of archaeology and poetry were perceived as intrinsically incompatible, other than as a second-order respondent (Carroll 1998). This is curious when one notes that most archaeology departments across Europe are located within the Arts and Humanities, not the Sciences. In practice, archaeology is a discipline with such breadth that it sits neatly between the two (Figure 10.1). The diversity of its many specialisms is so extensive that no archaeologist today can possess a comprehensive skill set. This chapter explores some of the challenges of working across this sprawling field, starting with theoretical considerations and moving on to examples drawn from my own practice.

Figure 10.1 Across the hall, doors/open with different keys/which all look the same (drawing and haiku by Erin Kavanagh)

Definitions and delineations

Archaeology is the search for fact. Not truth. If it's truth you're interested in, Dr. Tyree's Philosophy class is right down the hall.

(Indiana Jones 1989)

Fact, fiction, truth. The definitions, delineations and correlations between these concepts have been an increasing focus of debate for over a century (Frege 1892; Kripke 1972/1980; Meinong 1904; Vaihinger 1911; Prentice 1999), with the Philosophy of Fiction being a distinct area of enquiry in its own right (e.g. Currie 1990, 2011; Lamarque & Olsen, 1994; Friend 2011, 2012). It is also a territory in which archaeology walks a tightrope, whatever Professor Jones may assert. For surely, lifting (supposedly) factual data out of a multitude of potential (alleged) fictions in search of a ('true') past is archaeology's *raison d'être*? Definitions therefore matter.

Truth: That which is [...] in accordance with [...] reality.

(OED)

Without launching into a Heideggerian discourse on the nature of reality, let us take 'reality' to be the physical world as perceived through empiricism. Therefore, truth is the quality of those propositions that accord with empirically verifiable experience. Regarding fact and fiction, for the sake of this argument I shall adopt

the stance of literary critic Dorrit Cohn (1999), from whom I take the distinction between fact and fiction to be that the former is referential (to reality) and the latter is not. That is, fiction is something invented and, as such, it is therefore today often imbued “with a degree of covert negativity and frivolity” (ibid.: 3) because invented or conceptual things are weighted with a lighter degree of truth value than that of a tangible or material thing.

Poetry bridges these divides. It can be a fiction in that it is always conceptual, whilst also being referential. Likewise, it can be total make-believe. This brings us to science versus art:

Science: the intellectual and practical activity encompassing the systematic study of the structure and behaviour of the physical and natural world through observation and experiment.

(OED)

Art: works produced by human creative skill and imagination.

(OED)

Art and science are not mutually exclusive. A work can be produced with human creative skill by deploying the scientific imagination (Holton 1998; Wright Mills 2000; Stuart 2017), and it can also be done through observation and experimentation in the physical and natural world. If the latter were not the case, then we would not have landscape artists such as J.M.W. Turner or Thomas Gainsborough, nor would botanical and biological illustrations like those of Leonardo da Vinci, Charles Darwin and Ernst Haeckel have ever been able to exist.

The same applies to poetry as to painting. There is an entire genre of poetics that falls under the headings of Natural Science, Mathematics or Geology (Brown 2013). We need look no further than James Clerk Maxwell (1854) or James Joseph Sylvester (1870) for examples of scholars who excelled in combining two or more of these fields, along with those earlier and since, such as John Keats, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and J.H. Prynne. A fascination with the relationship between the sides of the alleged divide extends much further than C.P. Snow’s (1959/2001) infamous claim that science and the arts are two opposing cultures (see Mallory 1989; Brown 2001; Finn 2004; Zimmerman 2012; Bhatt 2016; Firth 2016).

Most of these, however, contain examples wherein science is contained *within* the poetry, not where the poetry itself is possibly scientific. For “poetry is not science, it does not aspire to be science,

and it cannot be thought of rationally as a replacement for science” (Brady in Prendergast 2009: xiii). If we look at the definitions, though, then we can see that while they can be distinguished easily one from the other, “they overlap to a great extent and do not differ absolutely in any particular” (Fry 1983: 168). Science does not have a monopoly on intellectual acuity. Nor does poetry have the only frame in which figurative language can be deployed—and, contrary to popular opinion, it does recognise both correct and incorrect form, content and interpretation, containing the systematic study of both object and subject. The conscientious poet will have been as analytical in their wielding of a pen as the most conscientious of scientists. As Mererid Hopwood (2004: xiii) states, regarding the Welsh *cynghanedd*, people sometimes “forget that art relies on the mastery of craft”. Craft, in turn, relies upon the application of method.

Method: a particular procedure for accomplishing or approaching something, especially a systematic or established one.

(OED)

One of the accomplishments of poetry is to allow us “to see ourselves freshly and keenly. It makes the invisible world visible” (Parini 2008: 181). This, surely, is what archaeology does too? Archaeology can reveal that which was invisible. It can reanimate a space, an artefact or an action that may have lain still and hidden for centuries, if not millennia. Archaeological practice draws us ever more deeply into dialogue with both the ground upon, and the traditions within which, we walk. It can reveal wonders. When therefore we walk the fine line between all of these definitions and delineations, where do we arrive? (Figure 10.2).

Figure 10.2 The tightrope between/fact and fiction is balanced/by seeking the truth (drawing and haiku by Erin Kavanagh)

Poetry as method: context

Poetry as method is not as improbable as it may, at first, appear. It has been extensively applied for research purposes within social science and anthropology with substantial results (Langer & Furman 2004; Longenbach 2004; Faulkner 2005; Neilsen 2008; Rosaldo 2015). In such work, poetry has been both product and process, wherein the poetics have been applied for a multitude of purposes (see Faulkner 2009: 21; Prendergast 2009: xx, xxi). It was also, of course, a staple of

classical and antiquarian writing through the use of lyricism as narrative form.

The poet and the historian differ not by writing in verse or in prose. The work of Herodotus might be put into verse, and it would still be a species of history, with metre no less than without it. The true difference is that one relates what has happened, the other what may happen. Poetry, therefore, is [...] more philosophical [...] than history: for poetry tends to express the universal, history the particular. By the universal I mean how a person of given character will on occasion speak or act, according to the law of probability or necessity; and it is this universality at which poetry aims.

(Arist. *Poet.* 9)

In this passage, Aristotle refutes Plato's assertion that the arts are the lowest form of expression, positioning himself against his teacher, rating the emotional content of poetry to be as commendable as its intellectual rigour and as representational as science. Aristotle's argument acknowledges that poetics adheres to a different set of truth values to that of science, answering to the human through being personal, passionate and porous. In this, the medium expresses embodied experience in a way that archaeology often avoids (Brady 2004). Let us, for example, consider site reports, the bread-and-butter of archaeological discourse. Their purpose is to convey data with maximum clarity, attempting to present as objective an account as possible. In so doing, they are necessarily dry, dispassionate and depersonalised. The authoritative voice is authorless; the contents are unpeopled. What we read are the results of an experience, but we have no inkling as to the phenomenological practice that led to those conclusions nor the breath of the landscape documented.

Whereas "a poem's power inheres less to its conclusions than in its propensity to resist them [...]" Rather than asking to be justified, poems ask us to exist" (Longenbach 2004: 10–11). It is simultaneously scholastic and self-illustrative. One defence for conventional archaeological prose is that it offers objective conclusions to bring about a comforting closure. I find the opposite to be the case: it restrains and limits the truth; it can suffocate. In contrast, poetry does "not close anything down" (Leggo 2008: 168), consequently giving voice to missing fragments, paying attention to process as well as product. These different methods do not require reconciliation; they

simply fulfil different criteria.

Allison Mickel has argued that in being hung up on results rather than process, “standard site reports fundamentally misrepresent the character and complexity of the research and reasoning process that generates these findings” (2012: 108). It decontextualises by distorting the authenticity of representation by removing the presence of those who are making the assertions. As the cultural anthropologist Renato Rosaldo (2015) observes, in academia we tend to tell what it is we are about to tell, then we tell what it is, then we tell what it is we have just told. We do not cut to the chase; we do not show—but why? “Why do we as researchers and scholars whose work needs to have more community currency than ever before, remain wedded to telling rather than showing or imagining?” (Neilsen 2008: 99). Instead, why do we not “seize back the creative initiative” (Eshun & Madge 2012: 1)?

There is a plethora of ways in which we can do this through fiction, as other chapters in this volume demonstrate. More often than not, however, when we place value on creativity in archaeology, we tend to do so by looking only to its output, by using it as a conclusion; its position as a point of outside engagement with an inside process. Other than for that purpose, poetry is mostly peripheral to archaeological vision, being no more than useful ornamentation. From the poet’s stance, however, it is slightly different, as everything is relevant. All is potential content, the landscape in particular, in which we poets wander, wondering.

We see this in exceptional writing, from Seamus Heaney and W.B. Yeats to Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Thomas Hardy, Robert Hass, Kathleen Jamie and George Mackay Brown, where land and artefacts find immortality in verse with an enduring clarity that allows us to recognise features and material culture with poignant accuracy. The purpose these poems serve, though, is essentially one of aesthetics, not empiricism. This is not to say that aesthetics is without epistemic agency (Gadamer 1982), but it is not the only value that poetics may provide.

It is worth noting at this juncture that, just because a poem is published or performed, it does not necessarily follow that it bears critique. The requirement of specialist training is often overlooked within interdisciplinary concerns. It is common, for example, to hear the assertion that a scientist can write a novel and that a novelist is not actually required for this end, which brings to my mind W. Somerset Maugham’s (1938: 176) observation that “there is an

impression abroad that everyone has it in him to write one book; but if by this is implied a good book the impression is false”.

We are, of course, harking back to Hopwood’s comment about the requirement of craft, which is far from being a solitary assertion. Revision, a refusal to lapse into licence and the ability to exceed a resistance to difficulty are all demanded of both the effective poet *and* the reader (Prynne 1961; Piirto 2002; Finch 2005). The problem with efficacy is that it requires expertise, and the problem with expertise is that it requires experts. Efficacy demands a certain level of skill to collate data, to disseminate them and to ken that of others. It also requires criteria for judging quality, which can be a minefield of its own. Nonetheless, every poet has to begin somewhere, be they attempting research through poetics or simply indulging the muse.

This is where consilience—agreement—between poetry and archaeology can fall into a trench of its own making. Just because somebody is skilled in understanding one area, it does not follow that they are skilled in another. When faced with an unfamiliar medium, they may therefore not possess the necessary skills required for comprehension. Compare, for example, the skills required to read a geophysical figure or a sonnet.

The result is that as narrow a field as site reportage is, poetry is not likely to be any broader. Let us not therefore claim that all archaeologists should attempt to produce literature. Or that we should all be capable of appreciating literature when it is placed before us, even if it pertains to our area of scientific interest. Not all archaeologists can use graphics software, create a pollen diagram or even record a test pit. Why should they be expected to be able to write or understand fiction or poetry? The reverse, of course, is also valid. As Melisa Cahnmann (2003: 30) states: “If poetry is to have greater impact on research, those engaged in poetic practices need to share our processes and products with the entire research community and the terms of its use must be clearly defined”.

Which is what follows here, without any claims towards excellence, merely the personal satisfaction of fulfilling a research requirement through the use of poetry rather than prose. All of these examples are personal proofs of concept, but hopefully they will also inspire others to begin the journey of acquiring the qualities and qualifications of an effective archaeopoet, or, at the very least, to be able to recognise one by page or ear.

Poetry as method: practice

The uses to which poetic enquiry can be put are multifarious, such as we find with the social geographers Eshun and Madge (2012). Ostensibly, they explored the use of poetry as a method for interpreting data collection in postcolonial geography research, but they also utilised it as a means of analysis, for uncovering the previously unheard voices of participants and as art in its own right. Their data consisted of extensive interviews within rural Akan communities. Their poetic representations of these interviews then reflected the local tradition of oration. It was therefore both a result *and* a method. While their work walks a politically charged path between imperialist and ethically sentient approaches, I suggest we take one step back. Let us consider how writing, reading or hearing a poem in response to the experience of working in the field can be of assistance in shaping knowledge, leading us beyond those austere conclusions so often required by funding bodies.

In my own explorations into this practice, I have noted that poetics can be deployed within archaeology in ways that reflect the prosaic agenda of Mickel's "fictive narrative" in tandem with Monica Prendergast's three forms of poetic inquiry:

Mickel (2012):

- 1) Expressing a narrative voice that is not the opinion of the writer (Joyce et al. 2002; Lamarque 1994)
- 2) Inviting free-form thematic interpretation (Deetz 1998; Pluciennik 1999)
- 3) Engaging the reader in a manner that transcends standard representation (White 1987)

Prendergast (2009):

- i) Vox Theoria; literature-voiced, responsive
- ii) Vox Autobiographia/Autoethnographia; researcher-voiced, overtly self-reflexive
- iii) Vox Participare; participant-voiced, from scripts (where the 'participants' have engaged in the research but are not the researcher)

I can make a match between each of these (author-ordered)

demarcations via my own case studies:

- (1)(iii): participant voices, poetry from scripts, are not the opinion of the writer
- (2)(ii): autobiographical/autoethnographical poems can be completely free form
- (3)(i): engaging the reader with archaeological material in a manner than transcends standard representations (and in response to those representations)

The second of Prendergast's identified forms is somewhat problematic because it could be said to refer to all poetry, as will become apparent. Ditto with the third of Mickel's forms, in that the purpose of poetry as a scientific narrative is that it transcends standard representation, alleviating some of the dehumanisation. It is simply a matter of degree. These pairings are loosely illustrated in the following examples, depicting three forms in which poetry can be employed as archaeological method.

(1)(iii) Expressing a narrative voice that is not the opinion of the writer/participant-voiced, from scripts

I do this by applying a technique called 'cut out' or 'found' poetics. This is where one takes a piece of someone else's writing (a 'script') and by cutting sections out, one is left with a more concise version. This can be done with any text. None is more predisposed to the method than any other, from highly technical observations of an auger core to extremely erudite fantastical descriptions. I find the form helpful in summarising the content of a piece for my own point of reference. By way of example, here is an excerpt from a paper on communicating geoscience, within which I have 'found' a poem:

Earth Stories: Context **and** Narrative in the **Communication** of Popular Science

Every UK geologist knows that the nation has a natural history that spans over three billion years of Earth's existence. Few supermarket checkout assistants have that appreciation. That its **history has left its clues in the rocks underfoot**—producing one of the richest and most varied stretches of geological real estates on the planet—is a revelation lost on your postman. Amateur rock hounds may be only too well aware of how that diverse geological underlay shapes the scenic grandeur of our land, but few

investment bankers have that familiarity. And those that read the pages of this journal keenly appreciate how our nation's rocks have contributed to a cultural legacy that instilled some of the scientific principles which guide our modern understanding of how the planet works, **but such enlightenment is unlikely to be shared** by your hairdresser. Even the fact that rocks, courtesy of the minerals within them, powered our country's industrial development is a thought too far **for most**.

The point is that most ordinary members **of the public**—even taxi drivers—lack any firm acquaintance with the bedrock on which they live. They **are** for the most part **blissfully unaware** that unassuming railway cuttings or riverside bluffs are listed as Regionally Important Geological Sites (RIGS) because they preserve fragile vestiges **of our geological** inheritance. Or that, by the same token, the holes in the ground from which our modern urban fabric was once quarried are similarly **portals into the past, and hence are protected** as Sites of Special Scientific Interest. For those who are not geologically minded, this apparent indifference to terra firma is arguably more an issue of detachment. **No one has told them** that such places are important. Or at least, no one has told them **in a way that makes them care**.

(Stewart & Nield 2013: 699)

Earth and Communication

Every UK Geologist knows
that history has left its clues
in the rocks underfoot—
but such enlightenment
is unlikely to be shared
for most of the public
are blissfully unaware
of our geological portals into the past
and hence are protected.
No one has told them
in a way that makes them care.

This is not intended as a performative piece or a literary gem. It is simply how I have taken notes for the last 30 years. It is a type of shorthand, utilised both for self-reflection and also when translating academic text for those beyond the field. The influence of my own

interpretation is unavoidable but not overt (otherwise it would render the purpose invalid). It is an intellectual excavation, where the finds tray is a mound of small words (Figure 10.3).

*Figure 10.3*Excavating words/is the task of the midnight/archaeologist
(drawing and haiku by Erin Kavanagh)

Recently, the notion of poetry in relation to abstracts seems to have gained traction. Sam Illingworth (2016), for example, engaged in qualitative and quantitative analysis in an attempt to ascertain whether a poem can offer an alternative summary of an academic paper. The conclusion was that to an informed reader (regarding the science, although not the topic), the orthodox abstract was sufficient, but that to an uninformed reader (regarding the science), the poem was more useful. While these results are both interesting and encouraging in relation to the interest generated, they were, of course, only to be expected. This is because what this study did not do, was to examine explicit and implicit bias in the readers, that is, the poetic expertise of both sets of readers in tandem with their scientific knowledge and the inherent preference for one field against another. One would not expect a scientist without training in poetics to prefer a poetical summary of a paper over a standardised prosaic one. Likewise, one would expect non-scientists to be more comfortable with text that did not utilise specialist language with which they were unfamiliar.

Illingworth's analysis thus usefully elucidates the importance of these factors. It does not, however, argue for poetry as method and therefore takes a different but complementary approach to that advanced here. What the approaches share is an awareness of empathic engagement. In the found poem from Stewart and Neild, the line "In a way that makes them care", is significant in a wider sense because by reinstating emotion, we create a route by which people can connect, can care about a place, an artefact, a period or a person past. The poem heightens the act of thinking, accessing what one is intuitively ruminating but has been unable to articulate through conventional means, or due to hermeneutical distraction (Gadamer 1960: 242). It replaces what the standard academic method removes. This is often a disquieting reaction to what some might call the 'ghosts' of a place; it reinhabits the bereft but working landscape. In this way, it facilitates poetic encounter (Harding 2017).

(2)(ii) Inviting free-form thematic interpretation/researcher-voiced, overtly self-reflexive

Some years ago, I was working on a prehistoric site in Essex where the ground took on the consistency of a wide platter of different confectionaries. It did not matter who in the team came to our test pit. If we referred to a layer as being 'gingerbread' or 'nougat', it was instantly identifiable. At one point, as the pit began to flood and the sediments became saturated, we even stood and held a serious discussion on whether we were dealing with ice cream or halva, a discussion that included not only the archaeologists but also the digger driver and landowner as equal contributors. That was not science, it was poesy. Metaphor and simile were being shared, not literalism. It was invaluable as a means of expressing the researcher voice whilst working in a trench that was 4m deep and collapsing in the rain. That was because there can be an immediacy to poetic thought that allows us to show, to make present and focus in such a way that the reader or listener is taken into the heart of a topic from the off.

From an unnamed continent
A forgotten lake responds with an iron jaw
Revealing untold silences
In the layering of clay.

(Kavanagh in Bates & Kavanagh 2015)

This example shows one of the ways in which I use research poetry, as a Polaroid in words, synchronic sentences that render what may be unrelated concepts or images into a single, ever present, moment. In this instance, the verse accompanies the cover image of the report on the test pit in question, a palaeolake, being dug by machine. Steps of clay were briefly revealed before flooding, and the iron teeth of the machine ate into the past with a relentless rigour. Those moments of visual revelation, from aeons past, would contain a silence, as if the ground were holding its breath. Then the stratigraphy would be gone in a slide and infolding groan. The brevity of poetic form is able to reflect the transience of those moments, of the stage behind the report to which it became the cover page, summarising the content to those who understand neither the subject nor the site in question.

Of course, this also does more than nod to Prendergast's third form (iii) because it engages the reader in a manner that does not conform to the standard model of the site report, although in every instance in which I have done that it has not been the primary purpose of the poem in question. To specialists unfamiliar with a specific site, it

provides sufficient information for them to understand what took place. To those both unfamiliar with a site and without specialist training, it exists as a simple aesthetic, or a glimpse into another world. This layering is what all poetry should do; it speaks on different levels to readers without loss of density. The advantage of this technique is that it can have a dual purpose in the field and for representation. I can be working on site, or in a workshop or conference, and be required to provide outreach through transparency, in a very short space of time. A simple way of achieving this is to tweet a verse alongside a photograph or drawing.

In addition to providing a simple sound bite for marketing and outreach, this method also serves as a diary entry, akin to a virtual site notebook. My physical site notebook is full of these stanzas—although they tend to be more complex. The concision and precision that the form demands sharpens one's attention, demanding a clarity often neglected during the physically arduous acquisition of data. Thus, when I am working in an area with which I am unfamiliar, it will also bring to the surface questions I did not know that I had no answer to. In so doing, it has triggered awareness of assumptions made through habit. In this way, a short poem can tighten thinking and create two-way traffic between product and process, for both the poet and the reader—including when they are one and the same person.

(3)(i) Engaging the reader in a manner that transcends standard representation/literature-voiced, responsive

In 2015, I launched a project called “Layers in the Landscape” (LitL 2016; Kavanagh 2018), sections of which have been funded by the Independent Social Research Foundation (ISRF). Stemming from my previous (and ongoing) research into stories about the Irish Sea, this proof of concept is a deep map of Cardigan Bay, combining many different ‘points of view’ and situating itself as academic research that is also in itself a method and a product to be used for tourism and heritage. One part of this has involved my need to bring together many scraps of mixed data into a single, overarching, narrative. Naturally, I chose to do this through poetry.

The result is a nearly 1,700-word epic with a series of additional satellite poems. The epic is entitled “King of the Sea Trees” ([Appendix](#)) and features a mythical creature who has earned royal status due to being the genius loci of a series of submerged forests. He has a crown of antlers, the same antlers that were found on Borth

beach in 2016 and which date from the Bronze Age. He has cloven hooves, which leave hoof prints in the clays and peats of the shoreline. He walks in the mist at low tide, like Herne the Hunter in a ghost world of lost trees, protecting the people on land from the sea and the sea from the people on land. He is a deluge spirit, a paradigmatic object of make-believe and shamanism, an archaeological voice.

This metaphysical entity contains elements of empirically verifiable fact: the antlers, the hoof prints, aspects of his history. His account also contains elements of literature from other writers, such as Taliesin, Dafydd ab Gwilym and R.S. Thomas. The mimesis is unsubtle and thus easily recognisable by those familiar with the relevant references, following in the footsteps of Hugh MacDiarmid (1934). The initial ‘story’ narrates 125,000 years of climate change and is direct in the information it portrays. It is also an imagined experience, presenting information about the coastline, where the facts are factually true and the fiction is fictively true, in that both are referential to propositions that exist in their own ontologies. Whether this makes the resulting piece a work of fiction or a work of nonfiction is a topic for elsewhere (see Cohn 1989; Currie 1990, 2014; Walton 1990; Davies 2001; Friend 2008). Certainly, my intention is that the narrative’s function is to serve didactically as nonfiction, platformed through a necessarily fictive narrator, unless one subscribes to the concept of supernatural beings, in which case the debate becomes somewhat more complicated.

Regardless, the “King of the Sea Trees” remains at once a creature from magic and a scientist speaking about data from the past through the medium of structured poetics, some of which is the poetry of the past. It is represented as an artwork, a booklet, a recording, in a film (Kavanagh & Whittaker 2016), through a song, online as verse, as a live performance and now in print. Transcending standard representations of both archaeology and poetics, it is literature voiced and responsive to changing data, participants and environment. It is quintessentially poetry as method.

The writing of this piece demanded much research by a team of experts. In defining the chronology, gaps in the evidence became apparent that otherwise would have been overlooked. In making the narrator’s testimony coherent, other gaps and anomalies surfaced, requiring a combination of educated guesses and further research. It reflects a cultural palimpsest and the demotic position (Pluciennik 2015) that we inhabit as living beings, regularly having to shift and

change like the tides as new pieces of information are revealed and amalgamated because “all encounter with the language of art, is an encounter with a still unfinished process and is in itself part of this process” (Gadamer 1960: 88). To have attempted this in prose, would have taken up an entire novel or/and monograph. These, in turn, would have taken a considerable amount of time and expense to produce, along with a great commitment on behalf of the reader. They would also be impossible to exhibit and resistant to multiple modes of adaptation. Applying poetry was therefore the most flexible and economical method.

Conclusions

This chapter has offered examples that show how poetry has served as a route to learning. In each case, the meta-methods have brought forth productive results, both through the act of creation and the output created. Prose requires more details to be provided than poetry does, for the latter flourishes on a diet of fragmentation. It can skip over unknowns without loss of coherence. This enables verse to step in where paragraphs cannot tread. Like poetry, archaeological prose is created in a culturally mediated context. It is time-bound, and we as the creators select what we include. We do not—cannot—analyse everything, and our writing is about presenting the opinions we have formed through the act of being trained, then applied to data collection and interpretation. Our objectivity is more limited than we tend to pretend, however hard we try. The more closely we position ourselves to empiricism, the more closely we move to the simple reporting of lists (measurements, artefacts, dates, lists of lists) and the further we get from communicating their significance. This is where poetry may help. Like prose, it can communicate propositional knowledge (‘knowing that’, as opposed to non-propositional knowledge, ‘knowing how’). That is, poetry can offer us truths or facts about the world. What it can also do, is to offer phenomenal knowledge (Broad 1925; Feigl 1958; Nagel 1974), an insight into the possible experience attending those lists, which includes the phenomenological and emotional content that archaeological physicalism denies. With the addition of fictive utterances, such as an imaginary narrator, it is able to suggest, or even reveal, conceptual edges to our thinking. This then facilitates an extension to our epistemic comprehension.

“King of the Sea Trees” typifies this: it is a list of geoscientific data

that is empirically verifiable, contained within a fictive point of view through an archetype (Jung 1928; Greene et al. 2012). The fiction positions itself as a series of segues between the facts, bringing fractured information into a coherent narrative that had otherwise proven to be impossible. It is also simultaneously accessible as outreach and as a point of reference for ourselves while we continue to check back, to be reminded of detail, to identify areas that require further investigation, questioning opinions relating to tangible material.

Ultimately, science, the humanities and poetry do not present reality. Each is, itself, a method of enquiry. Each is also in the realm of representation. The first is in the business of what the poet and philosopher Emily Grosholz (in Brown 2001: 71) calls “ontological neutralisation”, treating different things as if they were the same, based upon a shared concept of mathematical structure. In so doing it pertains to a notion of universality in the opposite direction to that of poetry, which strives for universality through experience. As Phillip Sidney asserted in 1549 (and published in 1579), poetry is the experience of living. It purifies the wit, enriches the memory, triggers catharsis. Poets are Roman ‘prophets’ (*vates*) and Greek ‘makers’ (*poiein*), existing, it would seem, on every continent and in every language. This is a universality that is every bit as rich as the ground within which we dig. What archaeology can gain from this approach is a succinct form of recording, dissemination and communication through the application of densified language. This is extremely useful when resources are particularly sparse. Due to its figurative nature, the multiple meanings offered can be directed with as much precision or ambiguity as is required, which can engage the imagination and thus provoke extended comprehension (Currie 2016). Whether this involves an emotive reaction to, or participation with, the data in question through the use of fictive utterances, is open to further examination. Nonetheless, how it can be integrated as an accepted mode of (commercial) practice will be entirely down to usage. If people use it, then it will be included; if not, then it will not. Some of us draw sketches of our fieldwork as we go along not because we are told that we must but because it works for us. A poem is no different. If I have had no problem working it into research, or in gaining a receptive audience, then I see no reason why other people cannot do so also. Yes, that may depend upon both interest and ability, but so does everything.

On a personal level, my investment in poetry as archaeological

method has yielded far more than anticipated. Akin to when writing a poem, I had a hunch, a feeling, I followed it like a child chasing a balloon. There is nothing complicated about this, but the path has not yet reached a final destination. There is substantially more to be examined, not least, the qualia debate and notions relating to empathy. Thus, whilst I do not offer here a definitive framework, I ask the reader to consider allowing him or herself a small platform on which to regain and express the wonder we feel when we hold a pot, discover a mosaic or make a leap of interpretation that could be every bit as useful as the rest of the words and images that we create (Gibbs, 1994). For if we are so enraptured with the wonder of it all that we lose our gaze in the heavens and fall headlong into a ditch, would that really be so bad? Who knows what we would find there. If we are to write about these wonders, let us at least try to do so, wonderfully (Figure 10.4).

Figure 10.4 An ode to a stone/is an attempt to wonder/at past encounters
(drawing and haiku by Erin Kavanagh)

Appendix

Kavanagh, K.E. 2016. “The King of the Sea Trees”. Produced for “Layers in the Landscape”; includes numerous other poets, such as Shakespeare and Taliesin.

KING OF THE SEA TREES

Prologue

...And from the storms

In this bay a new tale goes, that The King of the Sea
Trees,

Once a keeper here before the forest was submerged,
Doth in the spring time, when tides are low,
Walk 'round about the ruined oak, with great ragg'd
horns;

And there he tends the trees and fairy cattle
Makes dry the flood and cuts a drain

In a most considerate and patient manner.

You may not have heard of such a spirit, but now you
know

The land has born a myth

Received and delivered in our age!

Although he is older than the King of Longshank's woe
and wears many a layer,
If we listen, close as thieves,
We may yet hear his voice, calling above the waves...

The King Speaks...

Labourers and minstrels!
The hymns of angels
Shall raise dreams out of your drunken sleep.
Let me entreat you from before the beginning began...
The keeper of this present shore
Ere I became a returning stag
I was but a spirit of the place
125, 000 years' yore.
Born and reborn from the last interglacial
With hippos and lions I wandered here
Until the high coastline began to fall
And a chill took hold of fur and fold.
By a weathered horizon
The water's chest rose and fell
White gleaming through the busy scud
Unseeming in her quiet abode.

For 85,000 turns the climate dithered
Over musk ox and antelope, boar, elk and bear
With mammoth and rhino woolly
Against the ever changing cold
And the two-legged beast
Who had beside us roamed
Heavy browed and flaming
Faded with passing thought
Leaving barely a trace
Replaced by a modern face
With smaller heads and a rapid gait
Treading shadows into the shifting ground.

Then over their retreat
came the ochre-less ice...
The sea dropped to its knees
At her gelid and stealthy approach
The land grew pale in its demise

And my brethren turned back towards the east
Leaving me a throne. I took no form
But travelled in the patient wind
Over tundra hard and white as bone
The stars revolving in an old dance
Until I became but a sigh
In the moonlight of an empty age.

From my sleeping thus beside a nascent sky
At last I saw the ice pick up her restless feet
Waking with only one glance back
To her glacial bed
Trailing river gravels
In her wedding's wake
Plaiting stone with lingering fingers
She cast a deluge as her entourage
At the birth of a new world
Where the sea climbed from sediments
Some 20,000 years ago
Into the first discovered flood.

Slow to start
Seeking assurance from the emptiness
No ark came to carry me beyond
No more than a haze I was
Blown on Devensian backs
Like the breath of a dragon
Twisting in the arms
Of a young valley
Cradled by hesitant silt
I waited
For sunshine to unlock
The Holocene's unguarded door.

But when the way opened
My sight beheld a smaller place
Tidal flats and mud held sway
A salt marsh and reed swamp carried
Freshwater and a brackish taste.
Gravels took a cliff top view
And company began to gather

By seven and by two...
I welcomed them
As sovereign in my ancient state.
For I am the imperial lord
Of this forsaken land.

Six thousand years from where I now speak
The sea ceased her washing
And settled into heaven's rags
Of marsh, bog and scattered heath
Acorns sinking on the stem
Before the un-fragmented contentment
Of a mountain
Smaller in her green old age
Collecting memories
That gossip in shells
And the paper thin snail
Of a library who has hidden her books.

None else remembers
But the wild tenant moon
Who like the gritless sky
Keeps all his secrets safely locked away.
Under that glittering gaze
I became the picture of defence
A watercourse
An eagle grey
An albatross of glimmering eye
As dry manor faded from the day
I saw the song
The salmon knew

For I have been a coracle on Rhys Ddwfn's field
I have been the alder rain.
I have been an arrow and a spear
I have been a songbird on the breeze.
I have been a torrent from the hills
I have been the rainbow in every shower.
I have been a cat with speckled head
And a goat in the elder alone
I have been the reed and oaken leaf

And the sleeping peat they made.
I have been a butterfly
Bluer than the waters deep

I have been the howling of a wolf
And the silence of an owl.
I have been the blackest bee
Whose grave lies in the future
From where I watched the rivers spread
And swam like the seal.
I grazed as ungulates graze
And flew like the crane
Spilling language in my wake.
The years drowned.
I drank as aurochs' drink
And suckled like the swine

I ran amok with ass's legs
And my feathers wore a scaly shine.
I dressed in cloth of fragile foam
My breast as coiled as an exiled snake
A knife I carried to shear the storms
And my hooves left prints behind.
The antlers were a pride I wore
In reflection of my earlier glen
(Being not of meat for petty men
Neither will I disclose my secrets to slaves
Or sing wrong poetry into a battle fray).
Disguised for near three thousand years

Under cover of the salt and clay
Beneath the folding of a channel bronze with tears
Where children stood on shifting ground.
My span is measured in your mortal fears
—Oh but I tell you now—
I am still younger than my antlers betray
My bones are older than any caught remains.
The tines were but a crown I gave away...
But their shadow on my head does stay
For I know nothing—and everything—of being dead
I am but two days' old – my name is Hedd

I chose to live when all else fled.

There were more tales once
Beneath the ocean's whispering wave
But cultured acres have become
Reduced to misremembered myth
The names nought but a knot on thickening tongues
From the cradle of curlews and a fickle age.
A mermaid of layers
Mererid tends the underwater reign
And I the space between her unfenced lea
And the realms of tunnelling and iron
From where the fairies and a cut fire came.
They brought heather with them in their shoes

And juniper berries—pleasant strands
That bled onto skin like woad
Marking a pilgrimage on straight roads
War cowering around them like crows.
Stranger fists followed their course
Into a steely dusk
From which the Morgan stretched her onslaught out
To flood again—again—the folly from which her role is
shamed.

The seasons passed
With thirteen ships and a headless state
The pattern of grasses turned
(As all life must) to dust.

I care now for what is left behind
When tides are low
The beaches have become my will
To tend the peace
And make dry the blood
In stories
Where I keep you still
Hungering for the sound
Of history breaking on a fledgling shore.
You litter the way with boulders
Of your own making
And rail at the forgotten apple

As if your cellars inherited this fragile earth
Spreading your own dreams
Upon another's wound.
But it is I—and I alone—who keeps sweet Mererid safe
From the wreckage of her rage.
I gave her my crown
A lover's gift
A token to appease her sorrow
Between the living and the grave
Sitting in the perilous seat of time
Above her silent bells
(that ring only when the dead are brave)

Upon the herbs of forgotten lore I bring to her still
A lullaby of echoes
Into the mist of every dawn
And the listening poet's rhyme.

Epitaph

Fair things are slow to fade away,
Bear witness all, that as of yesterday
Out of the sea trees a King with ragg'd horns
Did entreat you with an age bowed head
A tempest in his palm.
If, while my passion I have thus imparted,
You deem my words untrue,
Then place your hand upon the ruined bark
And feel how it remembers peace for you,
You are not men of sin, but Destiny
That hath to instrument this lower world
And what is in't, the never-surfeited sea
Hath cause to drown your walls; and on this island
Where man doth inhabit; you listeners
Being most decided to make amends, I have made you a
truce;
For part of every year She will not hang or drown
Your proper land.
And, by the salt, I and my fellows
Will bring you gifts: the elements
Of whom your breakers are afraid may as well

Build from the sky, or with little bags attempt
 To kill the still-closing waters, as diminish
 One tear that's in her frown; there are none of us
 Who are invulnerable. I beseech you, build no more
 Out of respect of weather's range?
 Your culture is now too massy for your strengths
 And cannot be uplifted...Your battles will submerge...
 Lean not against this change but remember—
 For this be my business to you—that you all
 Who sit beside the castles here
 Exposed unto the sea, which hath requit it,
 You and your innocent child, for which foul deeds
 The powers, delaying, not forgetting, have
 Incensed the seas and shores, yea, all the creatures
 Against your peace. By thy own abuse,
 Thou art bereft; and do pronounce for me
 A lingering perdition, worse than any death
 Can be at once, I shall step by step attend
 You and Her ways; whose wrath to guard you from—
 Which here, in this Ceredigion end, all else falls
 Upon your heads—or 'tis nothing but storms
 And a rising tide ensuing.

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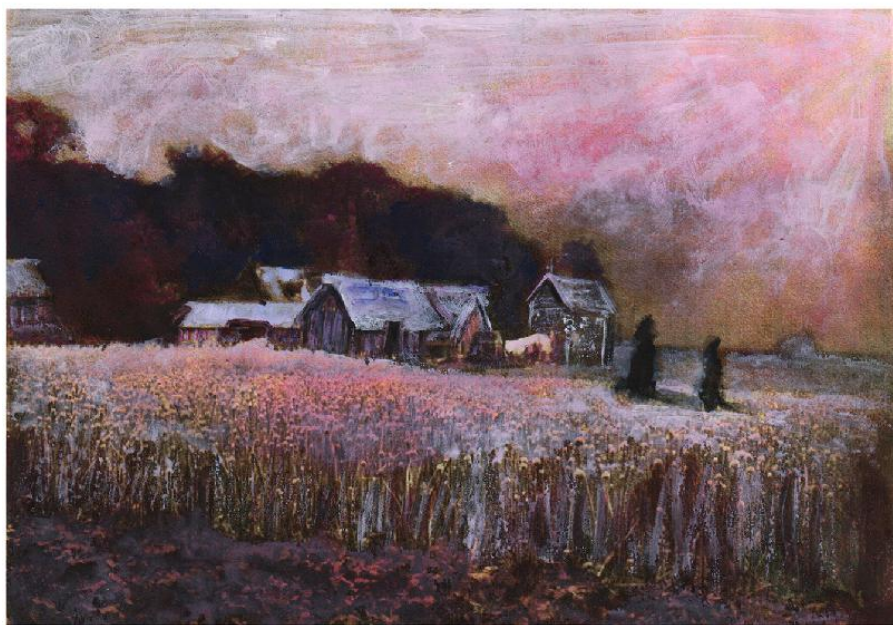
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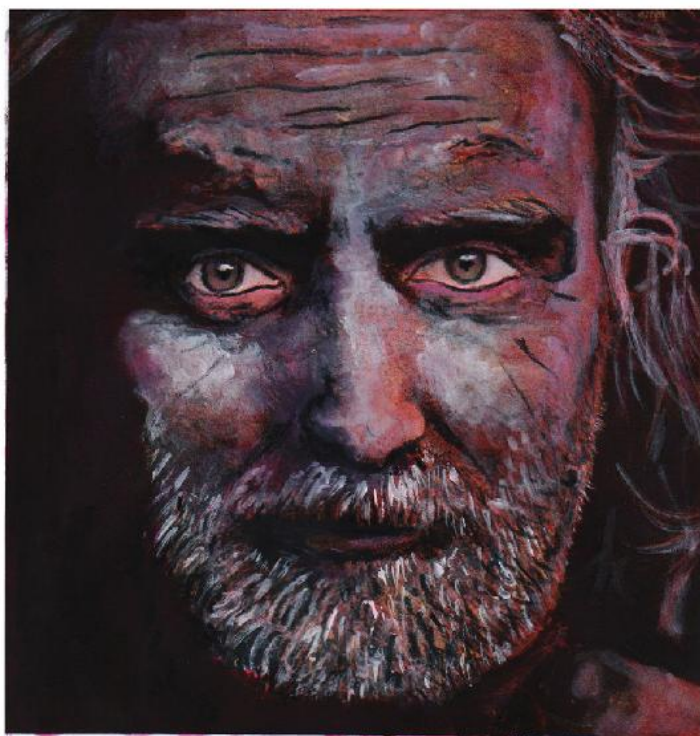
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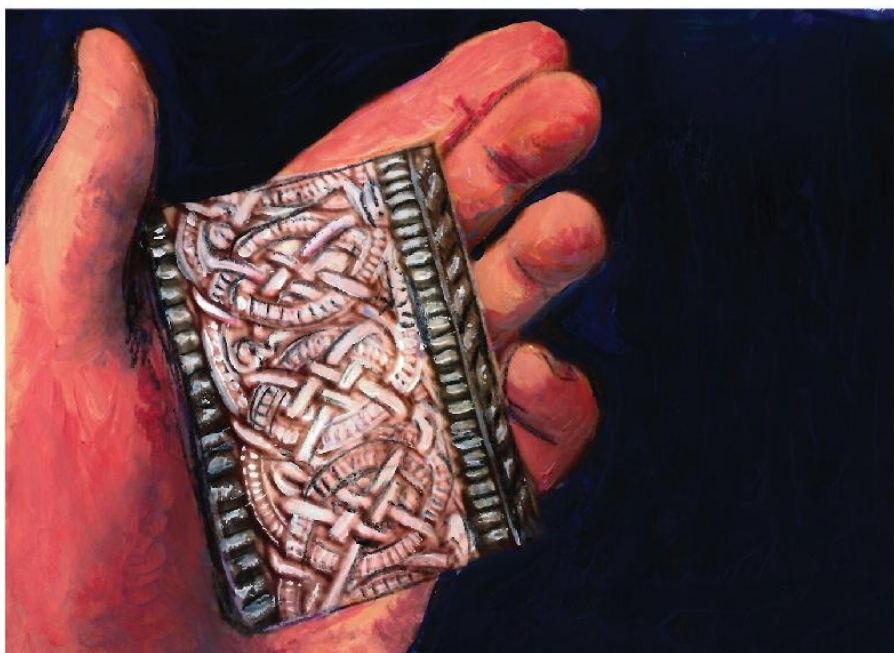
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11 Ambiguity and omission

Creative mediation of the unknowable past

Giacomo Savani and Victoria Thompson

Introduction (GS)

In a short essay on the difficulties of reconstructing dialogue in historical novels, Marguerite Yourcenar (1992) revealed her meticulous efforts to engage with the subtleties of language and tone. One particularly fruitful exercise involved translating a short passage of her own *Memoirs of Hadrian* (1955) into ancient Greek, the language which that emperor would most likely have used to think and write. The result showed that “eight words refused to be written in Greek” (Yourcenar 1992: 36). Yet, the author decided to keep those words, claiming that their “impression, if not the expression, seems authentic to me” (ibid.: 36). A balanced mixture of authenticity and inventiveness is crucial in (re)constructing all sorts of narratives of the past, in both written and visual works. In this chapter, we discuss the entangled threads that link archaeological and artistic attempts to decipher the stuff of which the past is made, building up from the collaborative experience of two scholars who are also creative artists.

The idea of combining visual art (GS) and textual narrative (VT) to investigate the past originated from our desire to explore the creative and scholarly possibilities of collaboration. The second author thus

wrote a vignette set in North-East England during the first half of the tenth century ad, revolving around an encounter between a master mason named Myredah and a boy, Gaut Bjornson, who craves to become his apprentice ([Appendix](#)). After together discussing the structure and ‘flavour’ of the story, the first author illustrated it with a series of acrylic paintings.

The first part of this chapter reviews recent work on the meaning of archaeological imagination, highlighting the potential of paratactic approaches to the past. The two following sections describe the creative process behind our contributions, offering insights into the difficulties and idiosyncrasies of each of our arts. We then contextualise our work within a broader frame of archaeological narratives and illustrations, investigating the impact that imagination and art might have on archaeological research and addressing the multifaceted challenges of representing and interpreting the past within and outside an academic context.

Theoretical frame (GS)

The nexus between archaeology and imagination has received significant attention over the last two decades (e.g. Jameson *et al.* 2003; Sanders 2009; Van Dyke & Bernbeck 2015a); its implications beyond the discipline have also been explored (e.g. Finn 2004; Schwyzer 2007). Definitions of ‘archaeological imagination’ range from a “way of being attuned to the world” (Thomas 1999: 63) and, therefore, able to ‘read’ the past as a hunter ‘reads’ the tracks of a prey, to a potential expression of creativity that “responds to what is missing rather than to what is there” (Wallace 2004: 24). Shanks (2012: 25) has recently stressed how imagination is precisely what allows the archaeologist “[t]o recreate the world behind the ruin in the land, to reanimate the people behind the sherd of antique pottery, a fragment of the past”, and how this “is rooted in a sensibility, a pervasive set of attitudes towards traces and remains, towards memory, time and temporality, the fabric of history”. The importance of this sensibility, Shanks (2012: 26–37) argues, is enhanced by the sense of insecurity and need to belong that permeates modern societies. Archaeological imagination thus conceptualised frequently becomes a propellant for cultural revivals and restorations with sometimes controversial results.

While a focus on the partial overlap between cultural memory and archaeological imagination is certainly productive, this approach can

lead to neglect of the role played by individual creative acts and their relationship with archaeology as a discipline. Shanks, in collaboration with Mike Pearson, has experimented with creative imagination in the volume *Theatre/Archaeology* (2001) and the results add much nuance to his theoretical discourse. In their introduction, they draw a parallel between archaeological interpretation and the performative interpretation of a dramatic work: both involve “an *active apprehension*—making a past work a present presence” (Pearson & Shanks 2001: 11, original emphasis). In particular, they relate the ideas of ‘assembling’ and ‘staging’ the past to the notion of hypotaxis (Pearson & Shanks 2001: 62–64). Hypotaxis is a grammatical term indicating a subordinate construction, and its Greek etymology (ὑπο- ‘beneath’ and -τάξις < τάσσειν ‘to place’) suggests some form of subordination or unequal role between the clauses of a sentence. Surprisingly, Pearson and Shanks use this term to identify a non-hierarchical approach to a site report, with documents of different natures (e.g. texts, images, musical notations) contributing collectively to create a more nuanced picture. In a previous section, the authors claim that hypotaxis has ‘implications of simultaneity’ in contrast with the ‘implications of sequentiality’ associated with parataxis (Pearson & Shanks 2001: 25), and this detail might explain their lexical choice. To avoid confusion, however, here we describe as ‘paratactic’ the scenario outlined by Pearson and Shanks where investigators with different backgrounds can equally contribute to the(re)construction of the past according to their expertise, skills and inclinations.

To a certain extent, this paratactic approach already exists (Evans 1993: 441; Lesure 2015: 65). Site reports, for example, are the result of the collaborative effort of several specialists. Among these are archaeological illustrators, and collaboration between (mostly visual) artists and archaeologists has a long tradition (e.g. Barkan 1999; Smiles 2007; Lurin & Burlot 2017; Savani 2019). In specific historical contexts, such as seventeenth-century ad Rome, the role of artists had become so prevalent that the past could be seen only through the lens of their imagination (Tschudi 2017). Similar precedents and the resulting concern for the risks of an imaginative archaeology have led many scholars to discourage any artistically creative interference (James 1997: 23; Bernbeck 2015: 258). Alan Sorrell (1981: 21), one of the most influential archaeological artists of the last century, captures this tension: “I think we have to decide whether archaeology (and, with it, archaeological reconstruction) is linked with what we know as humanistic culture, or is merely a technological offshoot”.

Pearson and Shanks' non-hierarchical approach offers a compromise that might help reconcile the discipline's two souls. In their model, creativity is not a threat to scientificity because these work on parallel planes—they are not competing to reveal an elusive historical truth (Pearson & Shanks 2001: 63; Wickham-Jones, this volume). Rather, they provide very different tools to engage with the same, fragmented picture of the past (see Kavanagh and Gibb, this volume). The following sections evaluate the implications of this assumption, building up from our experience of reconstructing the past within and outside academia.

Writing the past (VT)

Over the last generation, narrative has moved centre stage within archaeology, both in terms of interpretation and of hermeneutic:

Narrative is a means of understanding and describing the world in relation to agency [...] linking locales, landscape, actions, events and experiences together providing a synthesis of heterogeneous phenomena. In its simplest form it involves a story and a storyteller.

(Tilley 1994: 32)

Narrative foregrounds the contingent and embedded nature of knowledge, highlighting the ambiguities and omissions of our title. Gaps and uncertainties are often seen as problems to be solved, but our argument here is that they are not only inevitable but also a rich and exploitable resource (see Sorrell 1981: 25). Discovering stories in our material leads to the opposite of the traditional arc of academic writing in which a case is made, alternative hypotheses are disproved and a conclusion is drawn. Narrative rejects conclusions and opens the door to multiple interpretations and possibilities.

I first began writing narrative fiction explicitly as a research methodology, albeit in a playful mode. A specific line of enquiry in my project on the materiality and monumentality of burial in later Anglo-Saxon England had run into the sand for lack of evidence. According to the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (Cubbin 1996; O'Keeffe 2001), the bones of St Oswald had been transferred from Bardney (Lincolnshire) to Gloucester some 30 years after Lincolnshire had come under Scandinavian rule, but there was no evidence for what the Bardney shrine had looked like, how the relics had survived (if indeed they

were the real bones), or who was responsible for the translation. Each of the two manuscripts of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* that mentions the translation (in a single, brief sentence) files the event under a different year (905 and 909). I began filling in the gaps, playing with different, equally plausible scenarios. Very rapidly, my micro-narratives started falling into archetypal story patterns. The bones are treasure, the object of a quest; like the standard in Rosemary Sutcliff's (1954) *The Eagle of the Ninth*, inspired by a find from Silchester. The bones are also a touchstone for individual and cultural complexity. Fictional narrative has an in-built capacity for the articulation of a variety of conflicting and contradictory perspectives; it allows the reader to hold many possibilities in mind at once, rather than being forced to choose between them. It can also be used to highlight and exploit—rather than seek to resolve—irreconcilable problems within the data. The traditional academic voice is univocal, and usually passive. Fiction, in contrast, allows the multivocality of that complex past to assert itself.

The process of writing *The Bone Thief* (Whitworth 2012) and my next two novels, *The Traitors' Pit* (2013) and *The Daughter of the Wolf* (2016), made me look critically at the concept of historical fiction. This was not, it seemed to me, an accurate term for what I was doing, other than in the broadest terms. There are various ways of interrogating the past: historians, art historians, numismatists, archaeologists and literature scholars have different (if overlapping) theories, methodologies and datasets. Historical novelists often do exactly what archaeologists accuse historians of doing: writing the past from documents and using material culture as illustration. But in an age of actor-network theory, object biography and entanglement, this feels inadequate. I am helped by working on a period in which the historical record is sparse in the case of my first two books; for my third, set in Northumbria in ad 858–59, it is practically nonexistent. Here, landscape and artefact become agents: the reconstructed hinterland of the ninth-century ad Humber Estuary and a range of artefacts, most especially a set of silver strap ends based on those from Poppleton, North Yorkshire (Thomas 2006). They are active participants in the narrative, constructing and constraining the characters' choices. The plot has a frame narrative, a chronicle penned by one of the characters, which I use as a device to highlight the contingent, fragmentary and fugitive nature of the written record—including that of my own novel. In my current project (*Other Gods*, forthcoming), I have chosen a period in the early tenth century for which the historical record is slightly more robust, but by focusing on

materiality, landscape and female experience, I unpick and comment on the elite, masculine and military documentary and textual narrative.

Whereas historical fiction has a sizeable historiography and theory of its own, archaeological fiction has been much less theorised. The approach sketched above, however, opens the door to narrative centred on object-oriented analyses, employing phenomenology and an awareness that people iteratively constitute and are constituted by their material environment. Archaeology lends itself to the delusion of a godlike omniscience (see Bernbeck 2015: 259), a delusion fostered by the conventions of much archaeological illustration. This omniscience is echoed in my first three novels, all of which are written from a third-person perspective. In *Other Gods*, in contrast, I write in the first person, forcing me to think critically about the ways in which self and identity were constructed, both materially and socially, and the different degrees of agency possible. The experiment of filtering one's own consciousness—however partially and inaccurately—through that of another demands that the writer become hyper-aware of agency and intentionality in the material record (see also van Helden & Witcher, this volume). As the characters move and interact, I find myself asking what kind of archaeological footprints they are leaving behind, as well as speculating on their own attitudes towards and interactions with the monuments of the past.

The vignette written for this paper ([Appendix](#)) takes its inspiration from two extraordinary pieces of Anglo-Scandinavian sculpture (York, Newgate 1 and Nunburnholme 1a, Lang; [Figure 11.1](#)), about which I have also written academically. Both pieces are carved from limestone quarried at Tadcaster, originally brought to Roman York as ashlar; reused in the first half of the tenth century as part of an upright cross-shaft; and reused again in the later Middle Ages as building stone. Newgate 1 is of exceptional interest, in part because the same master craftsman can be identified at work on two other fragments (York Clifford St. 1 and York Coppergate 2).

[Figure 11.1](#)The Newgate 1 cross-shaft, now in the Yorkshire Museum, York. Accession number: YORYM: 1993.714 (photograph © York Museums Trust, Yorkshire Museum)

On each flat face of Newgate 1 is a decorative or figurative motif, contained within an arched border. Newgate 1 is distinguished by its unusual use of space and shape: whereas the convention with these cross-shafts is for the ornament to respect the field on which it is

carved, on Newgate 1 the artist has filled the empty space above the arches with angels whose faces are positioned on the corners between the sides and whose arms and wings spread behind them. The cross-shaft thus demands that it be viewed corner-on as well as face-on. The damaged cross-shaft—now at Nunburnholme in East Yorkshire, but probably originally from York—provides the only parallel in early medieval sculpture; and Newgate 1 is almost certainly originally dependent on Nunburnholme as, despite his impressive competence, the Newgate sculptor has misunderstood the way the Nunburnholme sculptor has designed the angels' wings. While there are some analogies in other media further afield (such as the four angels upholding a roundel of Christ in the ceiling mosaic in the San Zeno chapel of the Church of Santa Prassede in Rome, ad 817–24), they are remote enough to suggest that the Nunburnholme sculptor was innovating. The relationship between the two cross-shafts thus intrigues.

Newgate 1 is also interesting in terms of technique: the portrait of Christ, and the chains of beasts and birds, that adorn the other faces are confident and deeply modelled, but much of the angel ornament is shallowly incised, and the modelled wings and hands do not have the assurance of the decoration within the arches. The angels' heads are particularly clumsy in comparison with that of Christ. This suggests that the latter may have had a model, but the former are less familiar. Newgate 1 is also of outstanding interest because the marks of different tools—chisels and gouges—are still visible; the top has a hole, with the remains of molten lead used to hold the fixing pin for an upper component; and there are traces of red pigment. Engaging closely with the materiality of Newgate 1 thus draws the viewer into an unparalleled closeness with the world of the early medieval stone carver.

Visualising the past (GS)

Words can be evocative, suggestive, elusive, deceitful even. To a certain extent, writers can decide how much information they are willing to provide the reader of the narrative at any given moment. In contrast, illustrations tend to force artists to fix visually only one of the many possibilities implicit in the text; through the artists' eyes a gesture, a face, a landscape become a specific gesture, a recognisable face, a finite landscape. And what applies to the artist also applies to the theatrical script or screenplay of a novel. Usually, after the

features of a character have been revealed, artists are able to modify only minor details; significant changes would require specific justification in the narrative.

This visual fixing is a powerful and controversial process. Charles Dickens was so aware of the impact on the reader of the illustrations for his books that he personally supervised their creation (Cohen 1980: 5). The conditioning effects of images on the reader of a text are summarised in the *Vita di Alberto Pisani*, by Carlo Dossi (1870: 4), where the author explains the aversion of his main character, Alberto, for illustrated books:

According to him, illustrators were the sort of people that wanted to impose themselves on imagination; uncalled for, they intruded on where he wanted to be alone, face-to-face with his author. (translated by GS).

Starting work on the illustrations for Victoria's story, I was therefore aware of the consequences that my visual reinterpretation might have on the original text. During our preliminary meetings, we had many opportunities to discuss the theory underpinning our collaboration. The moment I outlined a sketch of the first plate, I was alone. The responsibility to give texture, colour and light to faces, gestures and feelings fell entirely on me. Was the light in this landscape what Victoria had imagined? Were the hands of this boy anywhere near to those she had in mind while writing of him fumbling with the knots of his pouch?

The search for a balanced and fruitful exchange between text and images was complicated further by the historical setting. Moreover, what I was going to depict was not a generic version of the past, it was the past Victoria had recreated. Her imagination was the prism through which I was to see the light and colours of a particular moment in time. Finally, both of us are archaeologists, adding an extra layer to this already complex picture. Was historical accuracy more important than empathy? Was the 'impression' more important than the 'expression', to use Yourcenar's (1992: 36) words? To what extent did I want the archaeologist to lead the artist or vice versa? Indeed, was there any real difference between these two roles? Below I reconstruct the creative process behind some of the artistic choices I made and evaluate them in light of theoretical considerations.

Figure 11.2 Gaut and his father arrive at Master Myredah's village (image by Giacomo Savani)

Figure 11.2 illustrates the start of the story and sets the mood for the entire project. Victoria's narrative begins, *ex abrupto*, in the dusty yard of the master mason's workshop. I felt the need to create a frame, a way to guide the reader into this past, and chose to open with two long shots. Inspiration came from the work of the photographer George Davison (1854–1930; Coe 1989). His historical landscapes captured the British countryside at a time more similar to the Anglo-Saxon period than that of today. Two atmospheric photogravures in particular captured my imagination: *Landscape* (c. 1910) and *An Old Farmstead* (also known as *The Onion Field*, 1890). The first shows an impressionistic landscape, dominated by a large, black tree. I decided to keep the composition and to work on the light and the chromatic palette. Colours, light and narrative are interconnected. In this case, my choice of a pale light and unnatural blue and purple tones was intended to evoke the foreign texture of the past (Lowenthal 1985). In *An Old Farmstead*, we see an onion field in the foreground and a group of buildings surrounded by a wood in the background. I superimposed my painting directly on to the original image, transforming the structures in the background into an Anglo-Saxon village and changing the atmosphere from bucolic to ominous.

Figure 11.3 Master Myredah (image by Giacomo Savani)

Another crucial element for my rendition was the choice of the protagonist Gaut Bjornson's face. Victoria never gives a physical description, only hinting at his leanness in two comments by Master Myredah (Figure 11.3). The process of 'finding' his face took a long time (Figures 11.4 and 11.5). In an early version, he had high cheekbones and ash-blond hair, but something in his sharp-cornered features did not satisfy me. After a series of unsuccessful attempts, I tried to work his face from multiple layers of paint, just like Gaut would have carved his way through a piece of wood. I intentionally left his lineaments slightly undefined, with the exception of his eyes where I hid a purple glare of determination. Above, I have mentioned the typical immutability of a character's physiognomy in book illustrations. Going partially against this, in Figure 11.5 I altered Gaut's face, enlarging his eyes in the frame where he looks at one of his carved pieces in Myredah's hand. The main reason for this was to express better the interior struggle of the boy while his art was weighed and judged by the master mason. At the same time, it was a subtle remark upon the elusive nature of the past—Gaut's features are mutable and cannot be grasped in their entirety, just like the past

itself.

*Figure 11.4*Gaut shows his work (image by Giacomo Savani)

*Figure 11.5*Gaut's art is weighed by Master Myredah (image by Giacomo Savani)

Finally, in *Figure 11.6* (frame 1), the most archaeological of my paintings, we see the interior of Master Myredah's workshop. The first version looked very much like a standard reconstruction of an Anglo-Saxon building, so I decided to discard it and to build a new one using only volumes and light. The new rendition was still architecturally accurate, but more evocative. My intent was to emphasise the sharp contrast between the bright light outside and the 'stuffy and thick with dust' atmosphere of the interior, to which Gaut had to accustom his eyes. Light plays a major role also in the first frame of the following plate (*Figure 11.7*), where it is charged with an almost narrative function: the brightness coming from the stone seems to guide and irresistibly attract Gaut's hand, like a beacon in the dark.

*Figure 11.6*Master Myredah's workshop (image by Giacomo Savani)

*Figure 11.7*Gaut's inspiration (image by Giacomo Savani)

Imagining the past (GS)

One of the main themes emerging from our accounts is that every attempt to engage with the past and to transform this distant, indefinite entity into narrative requires both knowledge and imagination. The challenges faced by artists and archaeologists are very much alike: to decipher the faint tracks of foreign people and landscapes before re-elaborating them into a story (Perry & Johnson 2014: 348–49). The difference lies in the approach towards gaps and uncertainties in the evidence. At the two extremes, we find the dry prose of excavation reports and the creative freedom of fantasy books. Yet, more complex questions arise when we decide to explore the grey areas between: how far can archaeologists use their imagination to fill the gaps? How deep down the archaeological rabbit hole can the artist go before creativity is constrained? Can a hybrid approach be useful to academic discourse (*Figure 11.8*)?

*Figure 11.8*Something new (image by Giacomo Savani)

In a brief passage about her decision to stop writing historical novels for children, Joyce Gard (the pseudonym of Joyce Reeves, 1911–1993), author of three delicate books set in Roman Britain

(Gard 1963, 1964, 1969), pinpointed the struggle to find a balance between creativity and accuracy (reported in Chevalier & Kirkpatrick 1990: 372):

That vein ran out after I went to the Orkneys and Shetlands some years ago looking for a children's book and became so severely infected with the archaeological virus that the resulting book was unpublishable even after two rewritings.

The archaeological virus is indeed a dangerous pathogen. My first attempt to reconstruct Master Myredah's workshop showcased all its symptoms: meticulously detailed and utterly inexpressive. Similar results are seen in many aseptic reconstructions of the past such as architectural drawings and cutaways, where any human element is either decorative or for scale (see Sorrell 1981: 21). In line with their scientific purpose, these illustrations offer no narrative (James 1997: 23).

In a few cases, however, archaeological illustrators have attempted 'atmospheric' reconstructions, where the human element plays a more significant role. The paintings of Alan Sorrell demonstrate how evocative the latter can be (Sorrell 1981; Perry & Johnson 2013, 2014; Sorrell & Sorrell 2018). His stormy and smoky ancient landscapes are a unique combination of "scientific rigour and Romantic sensibilit[y]" and embody "the inner tensions that all of us who call ourselves archaeologists regularly confront: balancing the art of imaginative interpretation with the demands of meticulous field practice" (Perry & Johnson 2013: 153). While in his famous aerial views of townscapes the human is mediated by the emotional charge of the weather (Sorrell 1981: 25), narrative plays a central role in his scenes of daily life. Among these, *The Son of Dervacus Inspects His Father's Monument* (1940) stands out for its vibrant intensity. In the misty light of a stormy dawn during the sixth century ad, we see a group of people surrounding an inscribed stone dedicated to Dervacus, son of Iustus (the so-called Maen Madoc, Ystradfellte, Powys). As noted by Redknap (2002: 15), "Sorrell's picture draws upon the imagination", stimulating the viewers to interrogate themselves about the past, present and future of these characters: "[t]he figures do not just provide scale—they are actors in a drama, and engaged in a visit to the memorial".

Another powerful example of atmospheric reconstructions is the

cover image created by Thomas A. Goskar for the first volume of the report on the High Speed 1 (Channel Tunnel Rail Link) excavations at Springhead and Northfleet, Kent (Andrews *et al.* 2011) (Figure 11.9). It shows a river flowing in a rural landscape bathed in moonlight. A colonnaded structure on the left and a Romano-British temple on the right are illuminated by oil lamps. Even if the landscape is devoid of people, the warm light of the lamps and the peculiar viewpoint hint at a human presence. The viewers are projected on a boat approaching the sanctuary, a heartening vision for the pilgrims who have finally reached their destination. These implicit layers of narrative, traceable in both Sorrell's and Goskar's works, are effective in recreating the physicality of specific moments in time, moments that appear as the sum of the individual stories that constitute the past.

Figure 11.9 The Romano-British temple at Springhead (Kent) according to T.A. Goskar (2011)

In the following passage from *The Eagle of the Ninth*, Sutcliff (1954: 6) describes the Romano-British town of *Isca Dumnoniorum* (Exeter) and its impression on the protagonist, centurion Marcus Flavius Aquila:

Dogs sat scratching in odd corners, lean pigs rooted among the garbage piles, and women with bracelets of gold or copper on very white arms sat in hut doorways, spinning or grinding corn. The blue smoke of many cooking-fires curled up into the quiet air, and the savoury smell of many evening meals mingled with the blue reek of wood-smoke and the sharper tang of horse-dropping, which Marcus had by now come to associate with all British towns.

Once again, the past is filtered through the experience of a specific individual. Furthermore, the third-person perspective reminds us of two other filters embedded in Sutcliff's (and others') writing: the author's personal consciousness and the archaeological interpretation of specific sites (e.g. *Isca Dumnoniorum*) at specific moments in time (e.g. 1950s) (see Evans 1993: 421; Elphinstone, this volume).

Mutual influences between historical fiction and archaeology have a long and established tradition (e.g. Evans 1993; Sanders 2009: 102–11; Hales & Paul 2011; Elphinstone & Wickham-Jones 2012; Henson, this volume). In a forthcoming paper on the reception of the Anglo-Saxon past c. 1750–1850, Roey Sweet (pers. comm.) shows how scanty and vague antiquarian descriptions of Anglo-Saxon settlements were up to the mid-nineteenth century, when Edward Bulwer-Lytton

(1848: 64–65) included a vivid portrayal of eleventh-century London in his *Harold, the Last of the Saxon Kings*. In this case, a fictional reconstruction, albeit based on archaeological and historical evidence, provided the first, synthetic impression of an Anglo-Saxon city. Bulwer-Lytton gave texture to blurry, evanescent moments in space and time, influencing scholars as much as he had been influenced by them (see Christensen 2004; Harrison 2011; see Paul, this volume).

These considerations suggest the potential that narratives (both pictorial and textual) might have in an academic discourse. Reality is constantly filtered through the human element, and emotional perception cannot be excluded from our understanding of the past. If we think of a site or an archaeological object as a picture (Pearson & Shanks 2001: 42–43), the emotional and narrative elements would be a series of photographic filters that highlight details otherwise lost and confused. They address the eyes of the archaeologists, enriching with nuances their comprehension of the past.

The multiple layers of interpretation that gather around a site or an object bring us back to the idea of parataxis. The volume *From Rancho to Reservoir* (Ziesing 1997) offers a fascinating example of this method, many of the authors combining archaeological and creative narratives in their contributions. One of these, “Elegant dining on California’s cattle frontier” (Ziesing et al. 1997) is particularly effective. In the first part of the chapter, the authors review information from historical documents and excavations regarding the dining practices of the mid-nineteenth-century inhabitants of the Rancho Vasco Adobe (California). Next comes a section entitled “Dinnertime, May 29, 1860: A Fantasy”, in which the authors reconstruct a midday dinner in the late spring of 1860. The evidence collected underpins a simple but captivating vignette of housework, food and business conversations, with “the bright, cheerful china” on the table “offset[ing] the dingy, smoke-stained walls” of the main room of the house (ibid.: 63). The catalogues of foodstuff and tableware found at the site are brought back to life and moulded into narrative, provoking an unexpected sense of participation. The distance between us and the people who owned and consumed these items is reduced, allowing the reader to smell for a moment “the scent of human flesh” (Bloch 1954: 26): an entanglement of troubles, playfulness, and obligations (see Sanders 2009: 66–67).

This process of humanising archaeology (Van Dyke & Bernbeck 2015b: 10) is not without its risks. Bernbeck (2015: 261) sees it as a form of disrespect:

we project political desires back in time, carrying out in the process an act of colonization. We deny past peoples the right to speak for themselves, simply because they are the ultimate Other, one who will never be able to talk back.

He claims that the Other we represent is nothing but a mirror of our Selves, an act of “diachronic violence” (ibid.: 262). Since the past remains foreign to us, he proposes as an alternative, inspired by the nouveau roman, fictionalising the past through incoherent subjects and narratives where meaningless objects are predominant. To test this, Bernbeck presents a vignette, built around the description of some pottery sherds, but his brief account remains imbued with the author’s sensibility: the sherds are emotionally intertwined with the humans who made and used them, contradicting the premise that “there is no symbolism in material culture” (ibid.: 260).

Conclusions (GS & VT)

The creative acts that lie behind narrative cannot be concealed; they are a mirror of the writer’s self and of his or her time. Instead of de-humanising traditional narrative forms, we argue that we should acknowledge that the past is unknowable and accept the risks of creatively engaging with it. As long as the authors are explicit in their use of imagination and are clear with their audience about what is based on facts, what has been integrated and the way this has been done, the scientific standards of the discipline are not jeopardised (Pollock 2015: 284–85). Furthermore, giving voices to past people does not necessarily mean appropriating their identities. Rather than a replication, archaeological narratives are a reinterpretation or re-enactment of the past (Pearson & Shanks 2001: 117–19). The characters of these re-enactments are therefore independent from the people who inspired them: they possess identities of their own, only partly shaped by the consciousness of their creators (see Gibb, this volume). Their fictional otherness produces a reverberation of the past, allowing us to engage with “the *recurrent, constant* and *typical* as echoing in us and intelligible through us” (Burckhardt 1943: 17; original emphasis).

In 1949, Rt Hon. Lord Harlech (president of the National Museum of Wales, 1937–1942) summarised the similarities between artists and archaeologists (quoted in Redknap 2002: 2) thus:

The archaeologist and historian are both scientists and artists. Their first aim is to seek objective truth and to debunk anything false, but they seek, as does the artist, to illumine the truth with imagination.

The past can be illuminated only by candlelight. We should never forget about the shadows that surround the few, shining fragments we painstakingly recover from the “wrecks still floating on the ocean of time” (Anonymous 1858: 5). These shadows demand different, hybrid eyes that can see through the elusive penumbra between truth and imagination.

Appendix: The Master Mason

He hadn't known you could smell stone.

But the yard was thick with an acrid odour that jabbed at the roof of his mouth, the hollow spaces behind his nostrils. His eyes had begun watering almost as soon as he had ducked through the wicket gate, his father's hand hard on his shoulder.

Or was it just the dust, irksome as any smell, in his nose and throat? A fine, whitish crust lay over everything in sight, including the hair and face of the master mason, emerging now from under the thatched lean-to. His eyes were squinted almost shut. When he spoke, his mouth was a wet red hole in a plasterly mask.

“This thy lad?”

“Já”, his father said. “This is Gaut”.

He pushed him forward. Gaut hadn't expected it. He was still taking in the piles of unshaped stone, the neatly stacked tools, the roughed-out slab just visible in the darkness of the lean-to, where the sound of metal on stone went on chink-chink-chinking in the gloom. He stumbled, and nearly pitched forward onto the master's white-powdered bare feet, dazzling in the sunlight. The mason put out a hand, but the boy righted himself, just in time.

The mason's hand went on coming forward, regardless. Gaut's upper arm was pinched between a thumb and fingers that rivalled any blacksmith's.

The squinty eyes narrowed even further. “Not much there”.

Gaut's father sounded apologetic. “Bairn's barely thirteen”.

“Needs feeding”, the mason said. It sounded like a challenge.

Gaut's head lifted.

Gaut's father said nothing.

“You’re no Jorvik man, by your voice”.

“Coll, herra”. Gaut’s father was twisting his felt cap in his hands. “From the Western Isles. But we’ve been in Jorvik for—”

“Tha said he worked wood”. Again that note of challenge.

“Show him”, his father hissed.

Gaut’s fingers went to the pouch that hung by knotted thongs from his belt. The knots were stiff, or perhaps his fingers were unwilling to reveal the contents to that inhuman gaze.

The mason was holding out his hand. Every digit was battered and misshapen, the nails ragged and bruise-blackened, and Gaut wondered how such crude instruments could be involved in the making of anything beautiful.

He was still fumbling with the knots. He had tied them far too tight, in his anxiety, before leaving the house.

The mason dropped his hand abruptly.

“Nej, herra!” His father sounded startled, pleading, almost frightened. Not a range of notes Gaut associated with that voice.

“Did think I was sending thee and thy lad away?” The mason rubbed his eyes with the back of his hand and yawned, huge and startling. “Come you both this way”.

There was a great stone trough lying on its side, a yard high and long as a man. The mason swept away dust and chippings with his sleeve.

“Here”. He gestured at the smooth, chiselled surface. “Set out thy bits of whittling. Let no man say Myredah failed to give anyone a fair hearing, even such a wisp of a lad as thee”.

Gaut was even more nervous now that he knew this troll-like man had the power to make his father whinny like a horse that smelt fire. He rubbed his palms on the coarse wadmal of his leggings and addressed himself again to the knots, digging his thumb-nail in deep.

They came free at last, and the lips of the bag parted.

It was heavy with wood and bone: it had banged against his thigh all the long walk up from their damp little bigging by the river to where the master mason held court under the shadow of the great kirk. He had tucked in all his treasures so proudly that morning, but now he was ashamed.

“Set’em out, then”.

White sycamore. Golden oak. Any wood he could beg from the coopers and the lathe-men, to crouch over in a corner, poking away with the tip of his belt-knife until his eyes ached in the half-light coming from the fire. The shank-bones of the kine, scavenged from the

broth-pot after the last shred of meat and marrow had been boiled away from them, and before his stepmother could lob them to the dog.

Half-a-dozen pieces he had thought fine enough to bring to show the master mason.

Now he cringed and flinched and could barely look on as the man lifted each one to tilt it this way and that, before setting it gently down.

“Where gets thy patterns, lad?”

His father came rushing in.

“The bairn means no offense, master. Has he trespassed? I’ll lam him, if he has—”, swinging round on Gaut with a frown and an upraised hand.

But the master was shaking his head. “Not so fast, goodman”. He turned back to Gaut. “I’ll have thee answer me, Gaut”.

“Where”—the boy swallowed against that bitter dust—“where as I find’em”. His voice was no more than a rasp.

“Master”, his father prompted in a hiss.

“Master”. There was more sound to his wind-pipe this time. He gulped hard again. “My mam’s old brooches. The kirk cross. I scrat the lines out on birk-bark first...”

“And change them”.

It was not a question. The master mason’s tone was flat as a floodplain.

Gaut looked nervously to his left but there was no comfort there: his father’s thin face was thundery.

He stared down at his half-a-dozen pieces of carved rubbish. He had been so proud... Why had he been so proud? He reached out a tentative hand and picked up the nearest. A piece of bone, maybe eight thumbs long. For this one, he had been inspired by the pattern on a saddle. He had held the man’s horse for a good half-an-hour by the kirkyard sun-marker—long enough for every detail of the decoration to be embedded in his memory—and he had been rewarded with a little ring of bronze, and time enough to feast his starveling gaze. The saddle had been made of wood, with a high bow, covered with fine red calf-leather, glued and polished and skimmed with gilt so that every incised line in the underlying wood was visible.

He had scuttled home, his head full of new whirls and whorls and linked patterns and lively twining beasts. He had roared through the tasks his stepmother had had waiting for him, and given her the little loop of bronze to sweeten her, and flung himself down on the pile of

skins in the corner to dig those images into this smooth, brownish surface, only slightly marred by the cut-marks where his stepmother's little cleaver had hacked the bone before cooking it.

It was, he had thought, his best.

Now he could only see where the pattern had slipped, where one beast's eye was twice the size of the next, where he had gone over-and-over instead of over-and-under...

Master Myredah's big, blunt hand took it away from him.

"Look me in the eye, lad".

He forced his face upwards.

The mason's eyes were still more than half-closed, but standing this near Gaut could make out they were a sky blue. And the man wasn't old, or not as old as he had come across at first, with his hair white as the finest flour and the dust settled in every crease around his eyes and mouth.

"Whyever dost want to work in stone? It's a filthy craft". He used the length of bone to jab at the piles of dust and stone-waste in the yard. "And this is high summer. You should see it come Yule". He barked with mirthless laughter, poking himself in the breastbone. "And see what a mummerly it makes of a man". He looked down again at the length of carved bone. "Tha hast somewhat of the feel of the thing, lad. There's plenty folk'd be glad to work in wood, though. Why this? Why stone? Hast ever carved stone?"

It was a fair, fine question.

"I never put mind to why..."

Gaut stared down at his carvings, piled like the kindling his stepmother threatened to make of them. For all his longing, he had never carved stone. There was no native stone in claggy Jorvik.

"Then think now". The voice was stern. The master's hand laid the length of bone back down along of its fellows.

His father began to say something but stuttered into silence at the master's growl.

Gaut clenched his hands. He wondered how he could ever put his thoughts into words. Then he saw something. The far side of the yard.

Where the nearest upright wooden post of the lean-to was set into the clayey soil.

"Look here, master?"

He tilted his face up, imploring.

The master said nothing, but he followed Gaut's lead across the yard.

"Gaut—"

But Gaut ignored his father.

He squatted down and pulled away a rotten splinter of wood, long as his belt-knife. "This wood", he said. "Elm, I'd reckon, herra?"

The master nodded.

"And been here—what, ten years?"

The master sucked his teeth. "Not so many. New-made for me when archbishop set me in charge. Eight years since".

"And it wicks up the wet". Gaut stared at the rotten wood with distaste. "New wood fights back", he said softly. "Knots. Grain. They turn the knife's tip. Snap it, happen".

"So, get a better knife".

Gaut shook his head.

"All that strife, herra, and then it gets old and does this to thee". He dropped the sliver of rotten wood back into the pale dust. "It's sad, soft stuff, wood. Bone's better, almost!" His fists were tight-clenched again. "When a song can live till Doomsday, why should a king's gravestone last for less?"

The master mason looked sceptical. "And tha'dst claim stone doesn't fight?"

"It won't fight me". He didn't know where he got this new assurance from. Perhaps he had nothing left to lose. He suddenly, desperately, didn't want to go back to that damp little house full of small children bent on crawling into the hearth or upsetting the pots of fermenting piss his stepmother had left out to rett her flax in.

"Come in", the master said suddenly. He turned on Gaut's father, raising a warning finger. "Stay without, thee".

Under the thatch of the lean-to, there was a youth, chipping away at another of the great troughs. The air was stuffy and thick with dust.

He looked up as they came in, and set his mallet and iron-tipped chisel carefully down.

"Master Myredah".

"Sandulf". The mason nodded a greeting. "This is Gaut Bjornson. Tell him how long tha hast been working for me".

"Three years come Michaelmas", the boy said. He looked to be fifteen or sixteen, but Gaut wasn't interested in him. His eyes were drawn irresistibly to the shaft held in a wooden framework resting against the back wall. It was still only roughed out: a long solid rectangle of white stone with panels of brawny, back-bent, intertwined animals—dogs on one side, and serpents, he found on the left, and birds to the right. Peer as he might, he couldn't see what was carved on the face set against the wall.

“Like it?”

“Já, herra”. He had no words. The stone was alive.

“The Christ on the last face”.

“And in the—the?”

Gaut gestured.

Each panel of the tense, supple birds and beasts was carved in an arched frame, and to the top left and right of each arch there was a blank space, like triangles but with the curve of the arch for their long side. Like wings. Arched wings.

“Spandrels”.

“Spandrels”. He tried out the new word. “What to put in the spandrels?”

The master frowned. “I was ettling to leave them thus”.

“Nej!” Gaut picked up a piece of charcoal and leapt forward.

Sandulf gave a strangled cry but the master snapped, and he was silent at once.

“Angels, herra”, Gaut said, blind to everything but his vision.

“No room”.

“Já, but there is”. He sketched with quick, confident lines. “A wing, see? And another one the other side”.

“But where’d tha put face?” The master was shaking his head. “There’s no room, above arch”.

“On the corners!” Gaut had never felt so alive. “Like this”. He turned and backed up to the corner of the stone, stretching his arms up and away behind him like the wings he could see so clearly. “Angel’s face on the corner. His wings like this, above and behind, one to each side of the stone. Above the arch, the wing-tips of two angels meet...” He turned to finish his drawing.

The charcoal was snatched from his fingers.

“Now I track thee. So the face, here...” Master Myredah sketched a dusty black oval, roughly the shape of a head, across the corner and over the two adjoining sides of the stone. “And then I cut it back...” He stood a step or two away, and contemplated, and nodded in satisfaction. “Já”.

Then he turned and looked at Gaut.

“This is a new thing. A shaft—what’s a shaft? Nowt but four flat sides. Never thought of this, using the corners, bringing them into the pattern”.

Gaut stood still, his elation ebbing. Was this bad, to think of a new thing?

The master’s face was grim.

“Sandulf”.

“Herra”.

“Tell Gaut Bjornson what work I have thee do. And take that mardy look off thy face”.

“I rough out”. Sandulf’s voice was still sullen. “I sharpen the chisels. I sweep the floor”.

The master nodded.

“And if tha comest to me, lad”—he swung round to Gaut—“mind, tha’ll do same. Years and bloody years of it. Canst thole it?”

Gaut thought for a long moment. Years of back-breaking, finger-smashing drudgery. And—he stole a glance at Sandulf’s knotted, wiry frame—years of Sandulf celebrating having someone smaller to kick about.

He looked at the mess of smeary black lines he and the master had left on the angles of the cross-shaft.

He straightened his back.

“I can”.

The master nodded. He ducked under the thatch, out into the blinding yard.

“Bjorn!” His voice was brisk, and warmer than Gaut had yet heard it. “From Coll, tha says? I’m a Lewis man mysen, by birth, any road. Shall us broach a cask of ale? Us men of the Suthreyjar have to stand together...”

The voices faded.

Gaut and Sandulf stared at each other.

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12 *Spartacus: Blood and Sand* (STARZ, 2010)

A necessary fiction?

Fiona Hobden

Introduction

By examining the archaeological past in contemporary culture as a ‘necessary fiction’, the present volume takes a theoretical position familiar to the ancient historian. The application to historiography of literary critique and a postmodern appreciation of contingency and subjectivity has revealed that the past is a fabrication (Munslow 2014). From the perspective of traditional historiography, which claims a special privilege to ‘truth’ through its ‘scientific’ evaluation of evidence and ‘fact’-based argument, this is a radical proposition that lends equivalence to any and all representations of the past. It also places professional historians and makers of historical fiction on a level playing field, contributing equally but differently to the shared cultural process of generating knowledge of the past. When evaluating these different forms of representation, the imperative is therefore to appreciate each according to its own tools, method and purposes (see Elliott, this volume). In this way, a fuller comprehension of the character, shape and significance of history as a contemporary practice and cultural phenomenon will grow (De Groot 2014; Aurell 2015).

Drawn this way, the field of production for historical knowledge extends across an array of cultural forms that produce versions of the past using text, images and sound to diverse ends. Amongst these, television ‘as historian’ (to borrow the title of a special issue of the journal *Film & History*, 2000) has received critical attention from professional historians, practitioners and experts in media and cultural studies (e.g. Knopp & Quandt 1988; Roberts & Taylor 2001; Grasso 2006; Bell & Gray 2010; for television in tandem with film, Treacey 2016). The focus of these studies, however, is almost entirely modern history programming. Arguments against the exceptionality of classical antiquity notwithstanding (e.g. Margolis 2017), the Greco-

Roman past occupies a distinctive place in the modern imagination that makes it worthy of special study (see Paul, this volume). Yet, because of the general lack of mainstream attention, television's ancient histories are not yet fully explored *as history*. It is within this context that the present chapter proceeds, working across disciplines to offer fresh insight into the representation of the past in contemporary culture through a single case study: the television drama *Spartacus: Blood and Sand* (2010).

Broadcast initially on the STARZ cable channel to over one million viewers, *Spartacus* was soon syndicated and made available globally via streaming services and followed by a prequel (*Spartacus: Gods of the Arena*, 2011), plus two sequels (*Spartacus: Vengeance*, 2012; *Spartacus: War of the Damned*, 2013) (see Augoustakis & Cyrino 2017: 4–6). By examining first the visual articulation of ancient Rome and, second, the exposition of Roman society enacted through human drama, this chapter illustrates how *Spartacus: Blood and Sand* (henceforth *Spartacus*) constructs its version of ancient Rome as civilisation and society and of the run-up to Spartacus' rebellion in 73 bc. Elements from prior fictional representations of ancient Rome, Roman material culture and the ancient written tradition are combined within a representational scheme marked by audio-visual innovation and narrative invention. The result is a morally charged, person-orientated and affect-rich account centred on the titular hero that also takes in other members of the gladiatorial school, the household of its owner Batiatus, and residents of the town of Capua, to where Spartacus is taken as a slave.

At first glance, *Spartacus* may seem a somewhat frivolous choice for the serious study of what ancient history on television is, what it does and why it matters. The series is notorious for lively expletives, explicit sex and extreme violence (e.g. Brooker 2010). By developing perspectives on social hierarchies, exploitation and slavery, however, *Spartacus* also illuminates human behaviour and thereby explores historical issues of contemporary relevance. Thus, as well as contributing to the construction of historical knowledge, *Spartacus* constitutes what Hayden White (2014) has called a 'practical past'. Furthermore, in service to the present volume, this apparent utility might even extend to encouraging reflection on the methods of professional historians for representing the past. Revelling in its own pulp excess (Simmons 2011: 145–46) and combining the so-called 'lowbrow' genres of melodrama, horror and pornography (Mueller 2018: 143–49), television's X-rated sex-, blood- and gore-fest is

arguably ‘a necessary fiction’.

Visualising Rome: from material- to story-world

Spartacus’ techniques are those of period drama, a mimetic form found also on the cinema screen and that shares elements with theatre. Hence, costumed actors occupy carefully composed sets distinguished by architectural and decorative features and filled with items that cumulatively connote the setting, and thereby provide a material manifestation of the time and place in which the action unfolds. The sets are based upon buildings and items from Roman Pompeii (Maurice 2017: 116–20, 124–27) and replicate visual tropes familiar from art, theatre, cinema and television. In turn, these conform to varying degrees with classical models due in particular to the influence of nineteenth-century painters like Lawrence Alma-Tadema (1836–1912), whose scenes of Roman life are architecturally authentic and artefact-rich, having themselves been informed by excavations, amongst other places, at Pompeii (Swanson 1977, esp. 27, 38, 43). The effect is a stylistic composite of ancient material culture, re-mediated for the series through prior representations. To watch *Spartacus* is thus to glimpse a familiar world, to have a generic sense of what ancient Rome looked like confirmed.

This effect is supported by *Spartacus*’ exaggeration of aesthetic trends. Its people are cruder and its streets are grubbier than in *Rome* (2004–2006), the HBO series that exemplified a wider tendency to make the past ‘dirty’ (De Groot 2009: 199–201; cf. Elliott 2015 on STARZ’s medieval offerings). Its colour palette of brown-pinks and grey-blues is even more muted than that of *Gladiator* (dir. R. Scott, 2000), which was noted for eschewing gleaming columns and bold colours (Michelakis 2017: 28). Furthermore, drawing influence from the film *300* (dir. Z. Snyder, 2006), the aesthetics of *Spartacus* are closer to a graphic novel or video game than realist television drama (Simmons 2011: 149; Manea 2015: 40–41). This world is a heightened and stylised version of itself: a hyper-reality, “a play of reality” in which “the real and the imaginary are confounded in a single totality” (Baudrillard 1988: 146). In its artful plasticity, as a simulacrum of prior simulations, ancient Rome of *Spartacus* is doubly “imaginatively convincing”, as Corner (1992: 99) describes the assumed reality effect of television drama.

Spartacus thus delivers a Rome whose physical instantiation meets viewer expectations. This Rome, however, is not a neutral amalgam

but impregnated with value. This is because the objects and people that comprise Rome's material world carry forward associations from earlier representations. Take, for example, the gladiatorial arena. The very first episode ('The Red Serpent') begins and ends here; and as a place where Spartacus and his fellow gladiators are repeatedly set to fight, it is a regular venue for action across the series. From the earliest historical accounts Spartacus is a leader of a group of gladiatorial escapees (already in Sallust's *Histories* 3.38 he is *princeps gladiatorum*), and so the prominence of the arena in *Spartacus* fits this 'fact'. In every scene, however, the serried crowd revels in the violence and death exhibited before it, exactly as it does in nineteenth-century paintings—most famously in Jean-Léon Gérôme's *Pollice Verso* (1872; see Spier 2010)—and in Hollywood film, from New Testament epics of the 1950s to *Gladiator* (Dunkle 2008). By conforming to the standard visual representational strategy, *Spartacus* embeds the action within a pre-existing moral scheme. Thus, when *Spartacus* launches with an arena scene, it immediately flags Roman behaviour as problematic.

As Pierce has observed more generally, *Spartacus* plugs into the 'historical consciousness' that equates the Romans with immorality (Pierce 2018: 156, quoting Wyke 1997: 3). The series, however, also generates its own evaluative prism by integrating the tropes of 'Rome' into a wider visual and narrative economy. So, by the time the arena scene begins in episode 1, the viewer is already primed for a disturbing sight by the reactions of the man who sits chained beneath the arena floor. Isolated and uncomprehending, the prisoner is aware only of the roar of the crowd and the blood of a victim dripping down from above. Introduced from below, the arena—as yet unseen—is a place that evokes fear and horror. Thus the material world is configured, mediated and audially enhanced to bring the viewer close to this man and to establish his psychological state. His fearful anticipation acts in tandem with the combat above to align the viewer with him against the Romans, whose depravity will be illustrated at length as the betrayals that lead the man to this moment are detailed in the remainder of the episode. For this man is—or will be—Spartacus; the familiar depiction of a morally depraved Rome is suborned to his personal narrative.

From this brief analysis, it is possible to identify the key principles that inform *Spartacus'* depiction of ancient Rome. Conjured through actors, costumes, sets, props and computer-generated imagery, the Roman world at once conforms to patterns set by previous visual

representations and narrative constructions and builds upon them to construct a distinctive material- and story-world. In this way, *Spartacus* blends ‘facts’ that are primarily ‘known’ through prior fiction but which are not without empirical basis (such as the popularity of the gladiatorial games in Roman Italy as evidenced by architectural developments during the first century bc: Futrell 1997: 35–44), to create a story about the life of a renowned historical individual, which similarly and inventively extrapolates from the meagre evidence. What might be called ‘common’ or ‘shared knowledge’ about Rome and about Spartacus is productively replicated and expanded in pursuit of a fresh story.

Dramatising Rome: close encounters with humankind

In the movement between the generic depiction of Romans en masse in the arena and the unique experience of a single man waiting below, the opening scene of “The Red Serpent” crystallises a wider strategy characteristic of *Spartacus*. Over 13 episodes, the series focuses on individuals who, like the chained prisoner, must navigate situations characteristic of the world in which they find themselves, the terms of which become clear as the action unfolds. The main players all live in (owners and household slaves) or below (gladiators and trainers) a villa perched on a cliff edge above Capua. This is a diverse cast, and their personal interactions generate the drama through which the narrative develops and a deeper impression of Roman society builds. Indeed, the division of characters by their sphere of operation highlights a key feature of *Spartacus*’ ancient Rome: namely, that it is a stratified society (Raucci 2017; as was true for historical Rome: see Parkin & Pomeroy 2007: 3–5).

From the beginning, however, *Spartacus* presents a more complex and dynamic social world. Relationships are formed across divides, and characters are driven by the desire to break through the limitations of their current status, to reposition themselves higher up or outside of the existing hierarchy. The drama emerges through this enmeshing of lives. This interconnectivity is of a different sort to that between the lower and higher orders in the series *Rome* (HBO, 2004–2006), wherein the actions of common soldiers impact upon high politics during the Late Republic (Lockett 2010: 105). In *Spartacus*, the concerns are above all domestic. Instead, class interactions are defined by and mediate existing power relations; those involving slaves especially foreground “the exploitation of the disadvantaged and

powerless” typical for Roman sword-and-sandal films (Pierce 2017: 233) and, indeed, typical for ancient Rome where the master-slave relationship was essentially one of “social and economic exploitation” (Bradley 1987: 18). The action segues between the demonstration of inequalities and injustices between the ranks and attempts at their redress.

In narrative terms this is best illustrated through the titular hero. His suffering begins when Glaber, commanding the Roman army for whom the Thracians are temporarily fighting, refuses to protect Thracian villages from Getae raiders. When the Thracians leave to help their kin, they are arrested as deserters. The hero and his wife, Sura, are captured and separated, and he is presented for execution in the arena (an elaboration of Appian’s brief description of Spartacus as a soldier turned prisoner turned gladiator in *Civil Wars* 1.14.116). Although the man survives, thanks to his purchase by Batiatus, from whom he earns the name Spartacus, he is soon forced into a savage fighting pit to earn his owner money, to have sex with the hateful Ilithyia at Lucretia’s vengeful connivance and to kill his best friend, Varro, at the behest of a magistrate’s son, Numerius. In the ultimate injustice—the discovery of which drives Spartacus to foment revolt and mass slaughter—Spartacus’ wife is located by Batiatus but then killed to ensure Spartacus’ commitment to his new life as Champion of Capua. Spartacus’ experiences amongst the Romans comprise a litany of exploitation and abuse. Other characters—including slave owners Lucretia and Batiatus—suffer their own humiliations: personal slights, physical indignities and worse at the hands of those with more money and of higher status. It is the slaves at the bottom of the social hierarchy, however, who fare worst.

The centrality of sex within this network of exploitation reflects again a wider representational tradition that associates the Romans with sexual depravity (Raucci 2013). Saliently, such behaviour is first witnessed from the perspective of the captive Thracians (Simões Rodrigues 2017: 44). The Romans’ enjoyment of sex is confirmed by the frequent copulation of Batiatus and Lucretia, aided in their efforts by the preparatory attention of slaves. And it is replayed throughout the series, when Romans ogle and fondle muscled gladiators, and naked female slaves and gladiators are made to fornicate for the pleasure of an excited crowd. Their experience is plausible within an ancient sexual economy that was permissive when it came to slavery (see Richlin 2014: 352 on the sexual abuse of slaves, extending to children). A moral position is afforded by scenes that show the slaves’

distress, however: Varro's pained visage and the blank expression of the woman he mounts (episode 3, 'Legends'), for example. Their physical discomfort invites the audience's moral discomfort. In *Spartacus*, sexual depravity is symptomatic of a pervasive exploitative relationship between master and slave.

A similar understanding might be drawn from the violent gladiatorial sequences, which again put the slaves' near-naked bodies centre screen. In addition to their sexual mistreatment, the gladiators in Batiatus' house face the additional trauma of fighting in the arena. Through rigorous training they are indoctrinated into a system that turns victory on the 'sacred sands' into a source of glory, honour, wealth and women, and offers them self-worth and companionship within a brotherhood of survivors (Cornelius 2015). What this means in reality is presented in heavily stylised scenes of combat characterised by severed heads and limbs, gushing blood and internal organs spilling from stomach wounds. Accompanied by thumping metal guitar music, the hyper-realistic gory spectacles move and delight the viewer as much as the cheering crowd (Gardner & Potter 2017: 219); but the consequences for the characters are dismemberment, life-threatening injury and death, as well as loss of status and position. Graffiti found at Pompeii suggest that some fighters notched up 70 or more victories (see Jacobelli 2003: 52), but for others, gladiatorial careers and lives were short (see Hopkins 1983: 25; with Beard 2008: 274, by whose estimate only one in four would have made it to their tenth fight). *Spartacus*' gruesome fight scenes artfully convey the intensity and horror of Rome's 'blood sports', and the precariousness of the gladiator's position.

Once again, the system is built upon exploitation: gladiators fight and die to generate income for their Roman masters. This is a system in which Spartacus temporarily invests himself, agreeing to earn wealth for his owner through bloody entertainment on the promise that Sura will be returned, and, following her death, on surrendering to fate. But his scepticism returns following the murder of Varro, who is perceived by Spartacus to be a husband and father but by Batiatus as a source of income, and the discovery of Batiatus' role in Sura's death. Tellingly, Spartacus' new awareness of his circumstances is fostered by a fevered dream in which golden coins tumble from an open wound in his side (episode 11, 'Old Wounds'). This connotes more than just the economic relationship, however. As Robert Rushing (2016: 96) observes, "the wound of the modern peplum hero becomes a sign of this mythical loss of true manliness". The punctured torso of

the scantily dressed gladiator articulates the subjection of the self to the will and the drives of others.

In the emotional economy of the show, garnered by scenes of sexual abuse and graphic violence, it is the slaves that evoke sympathy. This is further effected through the depth and intimacy of the relationships they share with one another as lovers and friends (Augoustakis 2013). Pleasurable lovemaking, to pick up the description by Anise Strong (2013: 176), is a means by which the characters gain agency and fulfilment within the bounds of their servitude (here *Spartacus* is noteworthy for quietly giving parity to hetero- and homosexual pairings: Foka 2015: 189–94; although West 2016: 144, 146–50 notes the conformity of Barca and Pietros' story to the 'queer tragedy'). And through abiding friendship, Spartacus and Varro find shared support as they each plan for a future with their wives: a contrast to the corrosive friendships between Lucretia and Ilithyia, characterised by bitchery and blackmail, and between Batiatus and Solonius, who plot each other's deaths. The failure of all but one of these partnerships, however, illuminates again the limits of slavery for the bonded individual. Each parting moment is poignantly realised with affect. For example, for the viewer watching Spartacus furiously pace his cell, smash furniture, pound the wall with his bare knuckles and then curl himself into a ball, his face crumpling and tears freely falling (episode 10, 'Party Favors'), Spartacus' gut-wrenching distress over having been forced to kill his friend Varro is infectious. Sharing in the emotion, a consequence of automatic physiological responses that mimic Spartacus' facial expression caught in extended and increasing close-up (see Plantinga 1999), the viewer's sympathy transforms into empathy (see van Helden & Witcher, this volume), aligning them fully with the suffering gladiator.

In sum, moral coding promoted by narrative development and audio-visual exposition, together with elicited emotional response, primes the viewer to take the side of the slaves, whose anguish is caused both by individual human action and their specific socio-economic circumstances (cf. Zarzosa 2013: 46). The gladiators' murderous rampage at the end of the final episode (episode 13, 'Kill Them All') thus fulfils demands for justice that arise from their mistreatment. Again, the denouement is emotional. When Crixus orders "Kill them! Kill them all!" and the German brothers Agron and Duro, wide-eyed and shouting, join the charge, the viewer, fuelled also by the loud pounding music of heavy-metal beats and guitar chords, shares their delight through associative affect. (For anecdotal

evidence, see Jones 2013, whose wife was reportedly moved to “stand up and applaud”; Gentile 2013 offers a psychologist’s warning about misreading the body’s stress response to watching such scenes of violence as an Aristotelian catharsis.) By the time Spartacus strikes Batiatus down in the closing act, many Romans who had gathered to watch Spartacus and Crixus fight to the death have met their own bloody ends. In the onslaught two melodramatic imperatives are met: “the suffering self [who] identifies with virtue as a means to validate its suffering, demanding reparations”, and the resolution of this scenario through the further infliction of pain (Zarzosa 2013: 46, 55). At the same time, the generic allegiance between stylised screen violence and “righteous vengeance” is realised (Symonds 2008: 153). By the end of the season, Spartacus and his comrades have obtained vengeance for the wrongs meted out against their loved ones. The destruction of the House of Batiatus is an act of justice.

This trajectory takes the story well beyond the rather limited ‘facts’ about Spartacus offered by the fragmentary and partial textual record (see Shaw 2001; Stampacchia 1976). Yet in spirit, it resonates with the accounts by Plutarch and Appian, the second-century *ad* authors who describe the War of Spartacus in greatest detail. Already Plutarch invests the slaves’ revolt with a moral imperative, accrediting it to “the injustice of their owner”. In addition, he heroises the Thracian leader, describing him as a man “possessed not only of great courage and strength, but also in sagacity and culture superior to his fortune, and more Hellenic than Thracian”, and making him the recipient of a prophecy from his wife that he is destined for “great and unfortunate things” (a prediction replayed word for word in *Spartacus* in Sura’s warning to her husband, following a dream in episode 1, and used as the title for episode 7) (*Crassus* 8.1, 2, 3). This elevation makes him a worthy antagonist for the Roman general Crassus, who halts the insurrection and is, in fact, the subject of the philosopher’s ambivalent biography (Urbainczyk 2004: 99–100). Only two hundred years after the slave revolt, Spartacus was legendary—someone whose unprecedented success in resisting Rome for more than two years must be accounted for. There is resonance too with the impetus ascribed to Appian’s Spartacans, “to strike for their own freedom rather than for the amusement of spectators” (*Civil Wars* 1.14.116). Seeking to recruit Crixus, Spartacus informs him “there is no glory, only blood, spilled for the pleasure of the Romans” (episode 12, ‘Revelations’. It is an accusatory approach to the arena that also resonates with a scene in the film *Gladiator* where, having slaughtered his opponents, Maximus

berates the cheering crowd with his own roar: “Are you not entertained?” (Paul 2013: 159, 277). Crixus is only convinced when he realises that Lucretia, having beaten and sold his beloved Naevia, is plotting his death; and, as already noted, Spartacus’ primary motivations are those of an injured husband. Like Plutarch and Appian, who also developed their accounts within a longer-running story-telling tradition, *Spartacus* venerates the gladiator and offers a moral basis for the slave revolt; however, these are developed within a narrative frame in which the house of Batiatus is brought down by personal betrayals.

At heart, *Spartacus* is a morality play. It maxes out the depravity of the Romans, whose lust for sex and death is revealed through the physical and emotional suffering of female house slaves and male gladiators, subject to the whims both of individual Romans and of the crowd. It works outwards from, but is unconstrained by, the already partial and loaded evidence for Spartacus’ rebellion. It also presents a vision of Rome predicated on earlier representations and works through a series of interlocking personal relationships, where differentials in status, wealth and power generate predicaments to be resolved within a zero-sum game. Even when situations are complex, the moral alignment with the disadvantaged against the privileged is facilitated by the building of sympathetic characters who display conventional moralities: Spartacus, who loves his wife and sets himself outside the circle of sexual exploitation; the happy go-lucky Varro, who is redeemed from his misdemeanours when he puts his wife and child’s safety before own; the Champion of Capua, Crixus, who is humanised through defeat and his all-consuming love for Naevia. All of *Spartacus*’ characters are fictional or fictionalised (in addition to Spartacus and Batiatus, Crixus and Oenomaus, plus the Roman Glaber, feature in ancient accounts: e.g. Appian *Civil War* 1.14.116). Yet, in this hyper-articulated version of Rome, their actions and choices are possible, comprehensible and therefore ‘real’. Mediated by the television screen, where the emotions expressed by actors are emphasised and transferred to viewers by close-up camera work and an intense musical score, the lives of the slaves and Romans are experienced by proxy. *Spartacus* thus affords knowledge of both ancient Roman society and the contours of wider human nature and behaviour, negatively (Romans) and positively (slaves) defined.

***Spartacus*’s historical fictions and the practical past**

In an interview defending the accuracy of disputed elements in the longer *Spartacus* series (swearing, pubic depilation, wigs, make-up and homosexuality), the show's creator and writer Stephen K. DeKnight explains his approach:

I always say we try to stay close to history. We'll bend it. We'll try not to break it. But at the end of the day, our number one job is to entertain the audience. No one should be writing a term paper based on the show.

(Nededog 2012)

While flexibility is necessitated by television's entertainment imperative, there is simultaneously a desire to remain within the bounds of history and an attempt to distance the show from historical practice. As this chapter argues, however, *Spartacus* operates as history, in that it comprises a distinctive representation of the past that generates knowledge and understanding of ancient Rome. This is achieved through visualisation and dramatisation. Using techniques familiar to television and operating as a period-costume drama set in a melodramatic mode, *Spartacus* delivers an emotionally charged and highly personalised narrative of the run-up to the War of Spartacus that focuses on the specific experiences of individual slaves and Romans living within a clearly drawn world. It thereby fosters understanding of human behaviour, by illustrating the actions, motivations and relationships of people living within a hierarchical society, where life and love are limited by structural inequalities in social, economic and political power. Like history films and history more generally, television's *Spartacus* constitutes "a mode of thinking that uses traces of the past and turns them into a coherent and meaningful narrative" (Rosenstone 2013: 82).

To locate *Spartacus*, a television show marked by visual, emotional and narrative excess, within the broader sweep of historical representation and practice is not to overlook its fictional status. Grounded in evidence for Spartacus in particular, and for Roman society more generally, it is above all the fleshed-out, invented story that provides the basis for the show's success as 'history'. Thus, as an account of the ancient world, *Spartacus* is perhaps best characterised as "a thought experiment about the past" and "a source of valuable and even innovative historical vision" (Davis 2000: 14–15, writing about historical films that also treat slavery). Merit lies first, in making slaves visible. Reflecting limitations in the written, visual and

archaeological evidence (Wiedemann 1997: 1–10), as well as a preference for contemplating the Roman elite, slaves are almost absent in scholarly accounts and for visitors to ancient sites (Joshel & Hackworth Petersen 2014: 1–8). *Spartacus* inserts slaves back into the spaces they occupied and the rhythms of daily life, and even goes further by giving them emotional lives and (limited) agency. Secondly, in the establishment of an integrated network of relationships and responsibilities through the household of Batiatus, *Spartacus* vividly conveys the textures and lines of power underpinning the ‘social institution’ of Roman slavery (Bradley 1994: 4). Thirdly, it also captures something of the physical and emotional experiences of gladiators and household slaves in ancient Rome. Certainly, slaves set to work in different contexts (house, countryside, mines) and roles (hard labour, administrative functions, domestic chores) would have experienced quite different lives, and the conditions of slavery varied across time (Bradley 1987: 14–16). The depiction of slavery is therefore partial. Nonetheless, *Spartacus* enacts a general truth that may be baldly stated—that a slave lacks ownership over their own body (Beard 2008: 235)—and spells out the implications of that truth in blood and tears. Informed speculation makes television’s historical fiction meaningful.

Moreover, with conflict between social agents as the prime driver for action, *Spartacus*’ engagement with the Roman past has further meaning. First-century bc Capua is riven by the desire for personal gain by the powerful at the expense of the powerless, and these inequalities are rectified when the slaves, whose experiences illustrate this, overpower the wrongdoers and liberate themselves. Through its fiction, *Spartacus* provides universalising insights into human behaviour across time and culture thanks to its detailed drawing of individual characters and their motivations, as well as the consequences of their actions for themselves and those around them. Its potential utility for individuals negotiating their own complex societies might elevate the show to the status of a ‘practical past’. Defined by White (2014: xiii), this is “the past that people as individuals or members of groups draw upon in order to make assessments and make decisions in ordinary everyday life as well as in extreme situations”. While viewers are unlikely to find themselves in a gladiatorial training ground, they too must operate within established social, economic and political hierarchies, and to do so successfully means recognising motivations and developing methods for their navigation. *Spartacus* is thus a potential source of social capital,

helping individuals understand their own lives and the world around them (Bousquet 2012), and, potentially, act based upon this knowledge.

For White, the potential for fictional histories to fulfil a practical role separates them from professional history, which at most serve the nation state by offering seemingly disinterested truths to support its founding narratives and political ideologies (White 2014: 7–8, 15–16). This definition of professional history, however, may be too narrow and the distinction drawn between it and ‘poetic’ versions of the past too strong. As Robert Rosenstone (2013: 82–83) notes, both historiography and history films meet the demands by Donald Kelly (1991) that history (i) commemorates significant people and events (in *Spartacus*, the titular hero and the slave rebellion against Rome); (ii) provides morally inflected lessons on ‘human nature’ (sketched positively and negatively in *Spartacus* through the interactions between slaves and Romans); (iii) facilitates ‘self-knowledge’ (by providing a reflexive prism on the motivations and conduct of *Spartacus*’ characters); and (iv) creates temporally broad cross-cultural perspectives on bigger issues that lead to ‘wisdom’ (the nature and consequences of exploitation and inequality as socio-economic phenomena established through the *Spartacus* series). Each criterion suggests a way in which history can be useful. Fitting the model, television’s *Spartacus* promotes social knowledge that can be carried forward into the present via “the past” as “a space of experience” (White 2014: 15).

The question arises, however, as to whether the representation in *Spartacus* might be more useful than an academic study in developing historical knowledge with contemporary relevance. Test-based conclusions assessing cognition demonstrate that information is better retained when it is presented in story form, rather than instrumentally (Dunbar 2014: 266–67), and that fiction, with its emotional content, has a greater impact on a reader’s views than evidenced-based argument (Gotschall 2013: 150). On this basis, *Spartacus* would in theory be more successful at promoting knowledge and understanding than an academic work. In this light, Brent Shaw’s dismissal of ‘empathy’ as a “faulty guide to historical understanding” in his book *Spartacus and the Slave Wars* seems off base and even a little self-serving, followed as it is by a collection of ancient sources that the reader must engage with if they are to have “any hope of crossing this chasm to better historical understanding” (Shaw 2001: 28). But aside from a few passages in which gladiators prefer to kill themselves than

fight, the direct slave experience remains out of view. This focus on the large-scale as opposed to the personal reflects fundamental differences between the writers of factual history and the creators of historical fiction, in terms of scope, ambition and method. Both Shaw's book and STARZ's *Spartacus* tell different stories: to judge one as inherently superior would be to overlook those differences.

A recent work by Michelle George on slavery at Pompeii suggests new possibilities for enriching academic studies on slavery in ways that resonate with *Spartacus*, even if they do not replicate the emotional excesses and moralising sledgehammer of the televisual account. Noting that imagination is exactly what is required in order to restore the town's servile population to the streets, shops, houses and factories that they once frequented, and to resurrect "the slave's perspective", George makes use of direct and evocative language to communicate the misery of the slave condition, despite the possibility of affectionate relationships with owners and other slaves, and their integration within the *familia* (George 2007: 538, 546; and, at greater length, Joshel & Hackworth Petersen 2014). Thus, household slaves inhabit a "drab environment"; as "instruments of their owners" they suffer "fundamental inequities" and occupy a "marginal position"; to owners they are "animate objects", "not considered fully human" and existing in "subordination" (George 2007: 539–40). Although discussion remains at the level of general rather than individual experience, reflecting a perceived need to approach slavery through its concrete organisation and roles (Joshel 2010: 11), the blunt description brings the unpleasantness of slave life into focus, and may even inspire pity. The effect, like the provocative titles of Ulrike Roth's *Thinking tools* (2007), on female agricultural slavery, and her edited collection *By the sweat of your brow* (2010), is to bring the humanity of the slave to the fore. While investigations proceed in each case with scholarly rigour, a moral perspective is brought to bear.

Such approaches offer a useful corrective to older studies that dismiss the psychology or experience of the slave as unrecoverable (Finley 1980: 117) or which bury it by approaching slavery as a 'system' (Westermann 1955). They also move beyond qualms about maintaining objectivity. In the course of building his discussion around the master–slave relationship, Bradley does not hold back from discussing negative consequences of the slave's inferior legal status and social position, particularly in the final chapter dedicated to 'Fear, Abuse, Violence'. In his opening pages, however, the historian denies bringing conscious 'moral judgement' to the issue; at the same time,

he justifies the topic by reference to the light it sheds on Roman society in toto, rather than its intrinsic interest (Bradley 1987: 14). While the former statement acts as a strike against accusations of partiality, the latter has the consequence of holding slaves at a distance and of normalising their treatment within a fully functioning system (as opposed to one in which violence and physical restraint are required because slaves revolt, households break down or the state is threatened: Thompson 2003: 217–66; Urbainczyk 2016). This refusal to engage with the morality of slavery seems tame, however, compared with the terms in which R.H. Barrow (1928) presents his study of *Slavery in the Roman Empire*. Taking accusations against slavery as its starting point, he styles his work a “defence” (ibid.: xiv), and asks:

Has slavery always been an evil? “There are conditions”, says Lord Acton, “in which it is scarcely an hyperbole to say that slavery itself is a stage on the road to freedom”. In the first two centuries of our era was done the spade-work in the task of civilizing the world, which is Rome’s legacy to later generations. What part did slavery play in this work? Was it so immoral, so degrading (as some modern critics regard it) as to hamper the work of Romanization? Or was it even an instrument in that very process, which was being carried forward by many influences? Was slavery consciously used by far-sighted statesmen for this very purpose?
(ibid.: xv)

Conducted through the language of civilisation and progress by which Europeans covered over the brutalities of imperialism, and making use of arguments attributed to a member of the British ruling establishment who supported the slave-owning South in these same terms during the American Civil War (see Powell 1996), Barrow’s defence is shocking. Human experience is effaced and slavery is placed beyond judgement; or worse, within a positive moral framework. After all, by Barrow’s (1928: xvi) account, opting to enslave rather than kill is a “mark of progress” and “the Roman defence of slavery [...] will be found [...] in a record of silent achievement”.

To be fair, no scholar makes such claims today. But at a time when in the UK the National Crime Agency estimates there are slaves “in every town and city”, with tens of thousands of people forced to work in the sex trade and in homes, factories and fields (BBC 2017), and when in the United States and beyond the Black Lives Matter

movement calls for social justice to address the deleterious effects of slavery down the generations, a robust, upfront presentation of the misery and degradations of slavery seems desirable in confronting a horrific crime and its continuing legacy. Offering a more human perspective in histories of Roman slavery would not only challenge systematic approaches to the topic that elide individual suffering, but also generate a version of history that might usefully illuminate a comparable contemporary phenomenon and inform public debates. In this, professional historians may only go so far. But the emotional, personal and moral dimensions of television history create opportunities to connect viewers intimately to issues that may otherwise seem remote from their daily experiences. As one such programme, *Spartacus* is a necessary fiction.

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13 Archaeology, historical fiction and Classical Reception Studies

Joanna Paul

In disciplinary terms, the academic study of the classical world has expanded dramatically over the course of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first. The traditional, text-based study of Greek and Latin literature—the study of the ‘classics’—continues to thrive, but it is now just one component of the multifaceted, dynamic and thoroughly interdisciplinary field of Classical Studies. That expansion has taken many forms, incorporating new objects of study, adopting new theoretical approaches to ancient material and paying more attention to political and other interpretative frameworks (see Hardwick & Harrison 2013 for a useful take on just one element of this expansion, the so-called Democratic Turn). Fired by each of these, arguably the most significant development in the recent disciplinary history of Classical Studies has been the flourishing of Classical Reception Studies (or Classical Receptions). In simple terms, this denotes the study of the multitude of ways “in which Greek and Roman material has been transmitted, translated, excerpted, interpreted, rewritten, re-imaged and represented” in everything from Renaissance drama to Hollywood film and from political discourse to catwalk fashion (Hardwick & Stray 2008: 1). Reception research consistently maintains a presence at major international conferences, such as the meetings of the Classical Association in the United Kingdom and the Society for Classical Studies in the United States. It also features in most undergraduate Classical Studies syllabuses, in the United Kingdom at least. A 2011 survey undertaken by the Classical Reception Studies Network found that approximately 75 per cent of the departments surveyed offered at least one module with a primary Classical Reception focus (<http://classicalreception.org>).

This chapter aims to offer suggestions for how the theories and approaches of Classical Reception—in both academic discourse and creative practice—might have some bearing on the questions explored throughout this volume. Indeed, as Classical Studies more generally now draw heavily on archaeology—usually requiring at least some

engagement with material culture, if not also archaeological practice, from students and scholars alike—so too does Classical Reception embrace archaeological approaches, as we will see at the end of this chapter. Moreover, Classical Reception Studies have for some time been engaged in exploring and debating the precise ways in which creative or fictional engagements with antiquity can contribute to our understanding of the past. Before considering some examples of this, however, let us begin with a brief introduction to the theoretical terrain of Classical Reception, and its origins in literary theory. Pioneering Classical Reception scholars, such as Charles Martindale, took their cue from the *Rezeptionsgeschichte* approach to texts, a branch of criticism established in Germany by figures such as Hans-Georg Gadamer and H.R. Jauss (see Martindale 1993; Hardwick 2013). These scholars proposed that the interpretation of a text was subject to the historical contingencies of its moment of reading and the ‘horizons of expectation’ brought to it by its reader, and that a text’s meaning was never fixed. Consequently, the study of how ancient texts are read, interpreted and crucially *reimagined* (whether through translation, adaptation or more creative refashioning) throughout history is shown to be more important (indeed more feasible) than any attempt to recover a text’s original meaning.

While literary study remains central to Classical Reception Studies, the field now encompasses a more disparate body of scholarship, in which *all* kinds of media are put under the spotlight, and the approaches to reading (or ‘reading’) antiquity by many different consumers are scrutinised. Studies of, for example, the ways in which filmmakers or historical novelists receive and reinterpret antiquity—not just its texts but also its material culture, its history and its ideas—have proliferated, and Classical Reception scholarship has begun to address itself to such a huge variety of subjects and disciplines that “no single theory of reception has proved able to provide for all the possible applications” (Martindale & Hardwick 2012: 1257). To an extent, engagement with ‘reception theory’ has aligned Classical Studies with the sorts of questions being asked in film, media and cultural studies (see Elliott, this volume), but whereas media reception theory primarily analyses an audience as the locus of meaning, Classical Reception Studies are often (though not always) concerned more with the texts or other creative responses “which readers/authors generate in response to other texts” (Willis 2017: 35). Within Classical Studies, too, differences of opinion over the practice of Classical Reception scholarship abound. In opposition to the so-called

new aesthetics that characterised Martindale's reception manifesto, others have argued strongly for the importance of reception as cultural history, and of paying due attention to "artworks that have made a significant difference by virtue of their public impact", rather than their perceived intrinsic worth (Goldhill 2011: 14; see also Goldhill 2010). Elsewhere, debate continues over the use of the term 'Classical Tradition' as an alternative to Classical Reception. Initially resisted for its apparent "connotations of conservatism and elitism" (Budelmann & Haubold 2008: 14), counterarguments supporting the idea of the 'tradition' (as ultimately more meaningful and coherent) are now made with increasing conviction (Grafton *et al.* 2013; Silk *et al.* 2017: 3–14).

This ongoing contestation and rethinking demonstrates the intellectual vigour of Classical Reception Studies. While it may lack theoretical and methodological consensus, its participants would likely all agree that reception scholarship underlines the value and necessity of studying the relationship between past and present, however that relationship is conceptualised and analysed. This value lies partly in the ability of Classical Reception Studies to account for the ongoing relevance of classical antiquity, but also in its capacity to renew our approaches to the past itself. While an axiom of Classical Reception Studies, in most cases, is the irrecoverability of original textual meaning (or authorial intent), still it is claimed that studying the reception of a text, and examining the meanings found in it by *other* readers, writers and artists, can help us approach the original text (or object, for that matter) with fresh insight. As Lorna Hardwick (2003: 4) explains:

It used sometimes to be said that reception studies only yield insights into the receiving society. Of course they do this, but they also focus critical attention back towards the ancient source and sometimes frame new questions or retrieve aspects of the source which have been marginalized or forgotten.

Classical Reception Studies have thereby suggested ways in which the concepts and methods of historical fiction (alongside a myriad of other forms of creative engagement with the past) have indeed contributed to the research process, and to a richer understanding of antiquity, both through scholarship *of* such creative works and through participation in the practice itself.

To take just one brief example: a recent article in the *Classical*

Receptions Journal analyses Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad* (2005), a short novel that puts Penelope, the archetypal long-suffering and patient wife of Odysseus, centre stage and recounts key events from Homer's epic poem from Penelope's perspective. Through various literary devices, the article argues, Atwood highlights and exploits key aspects of the Homeric text, particularly the ambiguities and inconsistencies in Penelope's portrayal, thereby "open[ing] up new insights into our reading of the *Odyssey*" (Hauser 2018: 123) and "refut[ing] traditional models of mono-directional influence" (ibid.: 111). A piece of historical fiction is thereby shown to be worthy of study not simply on its own terms but also for the light it can shed on its ancient source. Unusually, the author of the article, Emily Hauser, is herself a historical novelist, who has written her *own* fictional take on Homeric epic. Her novel, *For the Most Beautiful* (2016a), tells the story of the *Iliad* from a female perspective, giving voice to characters who barely speak at all in the original text. Asked whether she thought that the narrative strategy of her creative work "enhances our understanding of the ancient text as well", she agreed:

Absolutely. [...] In the *Iliad* there is an ambition to lay out what it is to be Greek, what it means to be a hero, to explore the nature of war. It's not an unambivalent project in Homer. With *For the Most Beautiful* I've tried to say that by taking on the female perspective we can see that from a different point of view, we can look through a different lens.

(Hauser 2016b)

If the present volume is concerned to establish whether the techniques of historical fiction can inform the process of archaeological research, then the cognate example of Classical Reception Studies would seem to offer encouragement. This is not to say that different perspectives on a text cannot be obtained through 'conventional' study of the text by itself, but rather that a modern reception, such as a piece of historical fiction, offers a valuable additional approach, and one that, through its novelty or difference, can often help illuminate those new perspectives with particular clarity or urgency. Classical Reception thereby enhances and enriches our understanding of classical literature, without seeking to replace traditional approaches to it. Of course, with this kind of literary reception, it is less a process of fiction helping us get closer to the 'facts', and more one of (modern) fiction offering us new ways to apprehend (ancient) fiction. But as we

have already seen, Classical Reception Studies range far beyond literature, and so it may be instructive to consider how this kind of scholarship deals with historical fiction that draws on the historical record and material evidence as much as it engages with classical literature. The example of Pompeii is particularly fertile ground for further exploration of these issues. This most famous of archaeological sites has inspired historical fiction—along with a vast multitude of other creative responses—since the very earliest days of the genre itself, most notably in the form of Edward Bulwer-Lytton's *The Last Days of Pompeii* (1834) and, as such, is fundamental to any examination of the relationship between archaeology and historical fiction. The scholarship on modern receptions of Pompeii is now extensive: good starting points are Coates *et al.* (2012), Coates and Seydl (2007), Hales and Paul (2011) and Moormann (2015).

Of course, Pompeii's cultural significance manifested itself through other means, too. After its catastrophic destruction in ad 79, and its apparent disappearance from the face of the Campanian countryside, Pompeii 'survived' in literary texts, particularly in the famous descriptions of the eruption of Vesuvius written by Pliny the Younger (*Letters* 6.16 and 6.20). Consequently, upon its rediscovery in the mid-eighteenth century, its material presence was set alongside (and sometimes in conflict with) both its own literary presence and broader preconceptions about the classical past (often derived from classical literature)—with interesting implications for its reanimation in historical fiction. Through the mundane domesticity of its material remains, Pompeii challenged assumptions about the grandeur and gravitas of Roman civilisation ("Pompeii surprises everyone by its compactness and its smallness of scale", remarked Johann Wolfgang von Goethe after his *Italian Journey* of 1786–1788) at the same time as offering an unparalleled and utterly seductive glimpse of the reality of Roman daily life, hitherto largely out of reach and confined, for the most part, to the dry pages of Cicero or Pliny. Fictionalised Pompeiis have therefore proliferated, and have subsequently commanded the attention of Classical Reception Studies. The powers of the novelist to "repair those graceful ruins, to reanimate the bones"—as Bulwer-Lytton (1834) described the process of reanimating the city's material remains, in his preface to *The Last Days of Pompeii*—are an important part of that appeal, but so too is historical fiction's capacity to call forth the *immaterial* aspects of the classical past. An oft-quoted passage of *Last Days* outlines the author's belief that his fiction would summon up "the bond which unites the most distant eras: men, nations,

customs perish; THE AFFECTIONS ARE IMMORTAL [...] The past lives again when we look upon its emotions—it lives in our own!” (Bulwer-Lytton 1834: Book 3, Chapter 2). Meilee Bridges (2011: 100) astutely pinpoints this as the reason for the immense success of Bulwer-Lytton’s novel:

Despite his pride in his novel’s scholarship, Bulwer-Lytton’s accomplishment with *The Last Days* was ultimately not historical detail; it was his capacity to convey to readers what they expected and wanted: realistic psychological and emotional portraits of the ancient Pompeians during their final days in, or their panicked escape from, the doomed city.

This is just one example of how recent scholarship has accounted for receptions of Pompeii in historical fiction, highlighting what Bridges describes as the ‘necromantic’ power of such responses to bring the past to life again. Moreover, this analysis underlines the fictionality of a reception like *Last Days*. Readers (or nineteenth-century ones, at any rate) embraced the apparent realism of Bulwer-Lytton’s depiction of Pompeii’s inhabitants. A more objective appraisal, however, drawing on the many studies of the history of emotions from a classical perspective (e.g. Konstan 2006), might hinge on the ultimate *inaccessibility* of ancient psychologies, calling attention to the fact that ‘emotions’ cannot be assumed to be universal—an ‘immortal’ bond between past and present—but are, instead, socially constructed. In this way, historical fiction may not lead us closer to ‘fact’, so much as highlight the aspects of the lived reality of the ancient past, which are that much harder to recreate, just as the ‘original meaning’ of a text remains irrecoverable. At the same time, the desire to recreate that reality or recover that meaning—to, in effect, inhabit the minds of our ancient forebears—is hard to resist; and it is often historical fiction to which we turn for those elusive, suggestive and speculative insights.

It might be said, therefore, that Classical Reception—both in its practice and its scholarship—has at times positioned itself as something that improves upon and supplements an inadequate archaeological record. It was not uncommon for early visitors to Pompeii to lament the glaring absence of people, of *life* at the site, even as they marvelled at the apparently pristine preservation of the accoutrements of the quotidian Roman past. In her novel *Corinne, or Italy* (1807), for example, Mme de Staël noted how “the very semblance of life in this place makes you even more sad at feeling its

eternal silence [...] What a long time men have existed!", she exclaimed; and yet "Where can their feelings and thoughts be found again?" (1998: 198–99). Into this void rushed the fictions of Bulwer-Lytton and the many who came after him, precisely to conjure up the 'feelings and thoughts' that archaeology seemed unable to supply. At the same time, it is important to end this short chapter with acknowledgement of the ways in which Classical Reception (again, in both creative and scholarly responses) has yet depended on the language and imagery of archaeology—or rather, perhaps, the archaeological imagination—for both inspiration and justification. In seeking to explain the complex process of accessing, interpreting and reimagining classical antiquity from a modern perspective, scholars and artists alike have often turned to the imagery of burial and loss, of excavation and of the fragment, even (perhaps especially) when discussing ancient literary culture and its modern presence (see Barkan 2001 for the example of Renaissance culture).

As an indicative example, take Federico Fellini's film adaptation (in its loosest sense) of the first-century AD Roman novel by Petronius, *Satyricon*; the film is purposefully labelled *Fellini-Satyricon* (1969) to show the unmistakable stamp of ownership by the Italian auteur. Petronius' text survives only in fragments, which Fellini wove together—along with many other literary influences—to create a powerfully hallucinogenic, unnerving vision of antiquity as something entirely alien, unintelligible and inaccessible to the modern world. In order to explain his approach, Fellini (1970: 45; see also Paul 2013; Barrow 2015) turned to archaeology, describing his adaptation as something achieved:

not through the fruit of a bookish, scholastic documentation, a literal fidelity to the text, but rather in the way an archaeologist reconstructs something alluding to the form of an amphora or a statue from a few potsherds. Our film, through the fragmentary recurrence of its episodes, should restore the image of a vanished world without completing it.

The power of the archaeological process as *metaphor* finds its way into a wide array of modern receptions of the classical past, and indeed into attempts to explain the very essence of what it is to be human, and what it is to look back to, and attempt to connect with, a buried past. Of this tendency there is no more famous example than Sigmund Freud, whose use of archaeological imagery to explain the

psychoanalytical process was fuelled, in no small part, by his own ‘reading’ of Pompeii, particularly through the short story “Gradiva” by Wilhelm Jensen (1902; on this, see Wallace 2004: 80–100; Orrells 2011). In this way, the interdependency of different routes to accessing the classical past—through Classical Studies, archaeology and the creation of fiction itself—is clearly demonstrated.

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14Imagining the past through Film and Cultural Studies

Andrew B.R. Elliott

Introduction

In a 1976 volume entitled *The Historian and Film*, the editor Paul Smith offered a very early defence of the possibilities of film—and by implication, all forms of media—for raising questions about history. In his introduction, he noted that “nothing has been more curious in discussions of film’s role in historical studies than the degree of suspicion directed against it by historians who are prepared to accept verbal material with far less critical apprehension” (Smith 1976: 6). Over the subsequent 40 years, a quiet revolution has taken place, to the extent that today entire conferences and subdisciplines are dedicated to the study of media depictions of the past, with only a handful of the most obdurately near-sighted objectors remaining. This chapter uses the breadth and scope of current modes of studying visual representations of the past as a starting point to discuss how these media can pose useful new questions and offer original insights into the study of the past.

A second point of departure, well illustrated by the other chapters in this volume, is the observation that history (*sensu lato*) is far from a monolithic and objective discipline. Indeed, part of the gradual acceptance of film as a mode of historical enquiry among both film scholars and historians relies on the recognition of the significant differences between history (as an academic subject) and historical representation (as a more general sense of the past) (see, in particular, Rosenstone 1995a, 1995b). In turn this recognition offers an encouraging perspective on the ways in which film, television and other popular media depict the past. Rosenstone’s approach begins not from a wholesale rejection of historical representations but from an acknowledgement that historical accuracy is by no means the main criterion for judging their success or failure. Such a recognition has helped shift the debate over historical film and television away from tired questions of accuracy, towards consideration of whether any

given representation conforms to preconceived expectations of the past.

Accordingly, this chapter explores the ideology of accuracy in historical film and television—one of the most tenacious fault lines in discussions of modern representations of history—and some of the new paradigms for analysing film, television and other media. Elsewhere, I have explored the tension between accuracy (understood as an adherence to verifiable historical facts and data) and authenticity (as a mode of presenting plausible historical worlds or narratives) (Elliott 2011: 192–205; see also Woods 2004). Here, I show how an exploration of the accuracy debate from the opposite perspective—that of audiences and reception theory—offers new approaches for exploring historical representation.

The first question to be considered is not whether historical media are successful or what their effects on audiences might be, but rather to start from more basic issues about how audiences consume history through popular culture. After all, when scholars criticise representations of the past, we need to ask what precisely they are criticising. The unspoken implication here is that media depictions of history are inherently ‘bad’ because they can never be accurate. Such, for instance, was Louis Gottschalk’s famous lament in a letter to the MGM studio in 1935, in which he asserted that “no picture of a historical nature ought to be offered to the public until a reputable historian has had a chance to criticize and revise it” (Rosenstone 2001: 50). At the same time, however, it is increasingly accepted within historiographical criticism that to understand history in a Rankean sense, ‘as it really was’, is an impossible goal (see, for instance, Carr 1990 [1961]; White 1990; Gilderhus 2003). A paradox thus emerges that critiques of historical media are based upon an assumption of historical accuracy, but the latter is not itself agreed upon.

Further, even if the explosion of interest in historical fictions might thrill some historians (Edgerton & Rollins 2003; Niemi 2006; Bell & Gray 2010), the broader critical commentary is ambivalent, frequently demonstrating elitist assumptions about cultural value and unwittingly hiding behind Pierre Bourdieu’s (1989) cultural markers of taste to differentiate between high- and low-brow invocations of the past. Consequently, several commentators instinctively claim that these media reflect a general ‘dumbing down’ of history (e.g. Halpin 2003; Coles & Armstrong 2007), in what John Tusa memorably termed a ‘flight from intelligence’, indicative of a triumph of

enthusiasm over knowledge (Gibson 2005).

In summary, intractable criticisms of historical media focusing on inaccuracy make unfounded assumptions about historical truth. In turn, scholars of film, television, media and popular culture tend to be less concerned with issues of truth, as they are more focused on critiquing grand narratives as a disciplinary legacy of the cultural and linguistic turns of the 1960s and 1970s. This second position, however, risks entertaining a kind of relativism that is untenable for the serious study of historicity. A more challenging starting position, which I propose here, is to begin not with the accuracy of these media, but rather the question of why anyone should even care about their accuracy in the first place.

Why care about accuracy?

To pose the question, ‘why care about accuracy?’ may sound counterintuitive, even irresponsible. It is, nevertheless, an important starting point. It is scarcely controversial to suggest that historical media do not aim necessarily to reproduce faithfully historical facts, but rather to offer invented past worlds that are consumed *a priori* as part of a broader narrative. This leads to the obvious point that, if these mediated worlds are not designed to offer historically ‘accurate’ pasts, then the desire to measure and judge accuracy is at odds with the core purpose of their historical representations. This does not mean that such representations are always correct, nor that we ought to abandon any sense of truth in the embrace of a fully relativist position. Rather, the point is that historical media may not always share the goals of the professional historian, and so to focus on accuracy as a gauge of their success is sometimes to defeat the very purpose of their scholarly examination.

Indeed, many of the key advances in cultural studies and literary theory of the past few decades have involved the jettisoning of the very assumptions on which claims such as those above are based. For instance, reception theory argues that earlier theories of communication—particularly the dominant linear model of sender-message-receiver (Shannon 1949: 7; see Nöth 1995: 174–79)—cannot adequately explain the complex interrelations of communication, largely because they do not sufficiently acknowledge the heterogeneity of potential audience responses (DeFleur & Ball-Rokeach 1989; McQuail 1994). Applying these and other advances made in film, media and cultural studies to the investigation of

historical media emphasises the key point that different media do different things to different people.

If studies of mediated depictions of the past accept the idea of an active audience comprising many diverse audience members, rather than a passive and homogeneous mass, then a different process of understanding historical media becomes necessary. Once the agency of individual 'readers' is accepted, then logically what is being 'decoded'—to use the terminology of Stuart Hall, to which I return below—is not historical fact but the narrative recitation of a past event. This means that even if historians might seek accuracy, or lament its absence, active audience members might be looking for something very different. Again, this is not to say that historical media do not have a moral and ethical responsibility to represent facts with honesty. History, and its academic study, must not become a free-for-all treasure chest to be raided at will; such irresponsibility paves the way for purposeful and often powerful ideological misrepresentation. Rather, my argument is that when looking at how those pasts are mediated, looking solely for accuracy misses the point.

An impudent line of questioning might go further and ask why should the producers of historical media even bother to get it right? What if the 'right' thing is narratively uninteresting or would make for a less engaging film or TV series? It is certain, for example, that William Wallace did not, as he did in the film *Braveheart*, have sexual relations with the French princess Isabella (who, in any case, would have been three years old at the time of the film's setting). But a heretical observation is that the 'correct' historical version of events would have made for a less satisfying narrative. A knee-jerk lament over such inaccuracies is to miss the broader ideological question as to why Randall Wallace, the screenwriter of *Braveheart*, felt it important to suggest a Scottish subversion of English monarchic lineage. The latter is, for film scholars, a more meaningful and interesting line of inquiry. Hence, though accuracy is not a historical irrelevance, it can be more profitable to ask what such rewritten pasts do for an audience, the uses they make of them and the satisfaction they derive.

Are there different kinds of historical accuracy?

A different problem with historical media—particularly in the case of contested or sensitive histories—is that audiences and scholars are liable to look for different things. A historical TV series, for instance, might be bad because it gets its historical facts wrong, but it is more

likely to be rejected by audiences because it is badly scripted, acted or directed, or because it lacks coherence. A historian, however, might look for something entirely different. For instance, we might consider Riley-Smith's (2005) critique of the film *Kingdom of Heaven*:

[It] will feed the preconceptions of Arab nationalists and Islamists. The words and actions of the liberal brotherhood and the picture of Palestine as a Western frontier will confirm for the nationalists that medieval crusading was fundamentally about colonialism. On the other hand the fanaticism of most of the Christians in the film and their hatred of Islam is what the Islamists want to believe. At a time of inter-faith tension, nonsense like this will only reinforce existing myths.

The problem with this type of criticism is that Riley-Smith, as a respected authority on the history of Crusades, seizes upon inaccuracies according to criteria that are likely to be very different to those of many audience members. Indeed, the user forums on IMDb.com, for instance, reveal what an (admittedly small and unscientific) sample of viewers did comment on: some praise the film for its use of (apparently accurate) fencing stances; others point to inaccuracies such as Muslims praying in the wrong direction and English knights using the wrong types of cross, flag or weapons. Among all of the 100 or so comments studied, only one user explicitly comments on the film's reworking of medieval geopolitics. Such diversity of comment among the audience indicates that some viewers do indeed look for historical accuracy, but its definition varies from user to user. In looking for accuracy of detail, (e.g. fencing stances), viewers may overlook broader inaccuracies operating on the geopolitical and metaphorical level.

The essential problem here is not with the possibility—or perhaps inevitability—that any given film might distort historical truth, but with the nonspecialist's attitudes towards historical films and ability to detect those distortions. This is not a patronising 'popular audiences don't know history' line of argument, but rather an important point about how historical truth is perceived. Part of the problem is the pre-existing attitudes and knowledge brought to any given film, leading some to the prejudicial belief that

to accept film, especially the dramatic feature film, as being able to convey a kind of serious history (with a capital H), runs against

just about everything we have learned since our earliest days at school: History is [...] contained in thick tomes [...] And film, why that's just entertainment.

(Rosenstone 2006: 2)

Rosenstone's point, of course, is not that film is merely entertainment, but there is often *a priori* resistance to any possibility of historicity through these media.

Another problem with the kind of criticism, which gauges a film's worth purely on the basis of its alignment with historical accuracy, is that it fails to take into account the combined effect of the broader media 'diet' of audience members. The simple observation, following Hall and others, that a given sample of audience members will consume a vastly different media diet means that generalisations cannot be made about the effect of a single film in isolation. Accordingly, a broader (at this point purely theoretical) suggestion may be advanced about whether these films and TV series might cumulatively replicate another kind of historical enquiry. For instance, is it possible for popular depictions to challenge perceptions that might encourage a kind of historiographical criticism among viewers, even if the specific chain of influences might be hard to identify with any precision? Although Terry Gilliam's (1989) *Erik the Viking* is clearly not a vehicle of serious historical enquiry, by contesting the prevalent motif of Vikings as pillagers and rapists, the film introduces a small historiographical doubt about the conventional caricature, bringing about a dissensus in the otherwise homogeneous presentation throughout popular media of Vikings as horned-helmeted raiders and marauders. Such a dissensus is potentially, I argue, more influential on the popular perception of Vikings than a whole swathe of scholarly correctives.

Do historical media teach history?

Another aspect of the accuracy debate that stems from the unsubstantiated claims about the role of these media as sources of historical knowledge, is that historical fictions bear a responsibility towards their audiences to reflect the truth. The logic of such a claim, however, is based upon suppositions that have not been examined systematically, at least by those with the skills to analyse film and media. Most prominent is the conjecture that we are predisposed and able to learn history from these representations. This assumes that via

some as-yet-unspecified process, historical fictions are able and expected to teach history in a manner similar to formal education.

The logic of historical media-as-pedagogy relies on the assumption that audiences absorb content by some kind of osmotic process and therefore the histories presented have a responsibility to be ‘true’ or ‘accurate’. But this idea misconceives historical media as a perfect form of public history and reduces audiences to unthinking consumers. To date, despite a range of claims about the nature and constitution of these audiences, there has been no single, broad-spectrum, sustained study of *what* audiences are actually watching in terms of history programming, *how* they are watching, and *how often*. In short, even if we know that audiences consume a great deal of historical media, we know little about what proportion of their ‘media diet’ such historical programming constitutes, and consequently little about what kinds of learning such media might offer.

Despite the absence of evidence, much of the criticism of historical media has been sweeping and dismissive, loaded (however subconsciously) with prejudice about class and education. It is common, for example, to find comments in newspapers and blogs that lament the idea that the excellent public history available through formal institutions is eschewed by audiences in favour of the latest popular TV series (Halpin 2003; Hill 2003; Mattisson 2014). Perhaps more surprising, however, is that scholarly assessments sometimes agree that popular historical media are not only growing in number, but are now the dominant mode through which the public engages with the past. Rollins, for example, in a book that generally welcomes historical films, nevertheless begins his study with the claim that “contemporary Americans know what they know about foreign affairs, domestic politics, and history primarily from what they see on the motion picture screen, television, and—in a recycled form—on videotape and DVD technologies” (2007: 1).

So entrenched, in fact, are these claims that they can even find themselves being used to destabilise scholarly authority, without any evidence offered in support of them. For example, Gaea Leinhardt (2000: 225) argues that today “students learn history outside of school [...] The voice of the academy is not privileged in the development of historical memory or in the constructions of students, their parents, or even teachers”. In turn, this prompted Paul Weinstein (2001: 27) to suggest that we give up and “acknowledge film and television media as the great educators of our time”. My point here is not to argue whether this is true, but to observe that as yet there has been no

evidence to demonstrate whether it is the case or not.

A necessary fiction

The issues addressed above feed into broader questions about historical accuracy and media consumption: what do users actually ‘do’ with the historical media they consume? To what degree must these media invent the past in order to communicate it? To what extent must historical media, in their focus on creating narratively satisfying stories, create what Georg Lukács (1962: 61) calls “necessary anachronisms”—or as the title of this book suggests, a necessary fiction? The final section of this chapter builds on these questions to show how insights from film, media and cultural studies, starting from the audience perspective, can offer new ways into these debates.

The first step is to acknowledge that when criticism of any particular media form talks about effects on the audience, it unknowingly adopts a disciplinary position that assumes audiences are passive and undifferentiated consumers. To be fair, it is true that a century of research has failed to achieve consensus about how the media really work. Nonetheless, while the field of media theory remains contested, the various positions collectively illustrate one basic point: there is simply no single and identifiable means through which a single message might come to be transmitted directly and unchanged to disparate audience members. Such is the logic of, for instance, the hypodermic-needle or media-effects theorists based in psychology, whose “capacity to demonise the media, making transgressive imagery seem all-powerful, hinges upon variants of the tacit assumption that audiences function as passive automatons when responding to screen messages” (Barker & Petley 2001: 125; see also Eysenck & Nias 1978; for a debunking of the latter, see Lewis 2013).

Instead, I wish to summarise and reiterate a theory that first emerged in the 1970s and which was significantly refined in the 1980s: Stuart Hall’s (1999: 94) encoding/decoding model. Hall’s theoretical model is complex, but in essence it begins with the (then-counterintuitive) idea that audiences are both disparate and active in the creation of meaning. Hall’s ideas were clearly rooted in the reception studies of the 1960s and 1970s. Within that field, amid a flurry of postmodernist scepticism toward grand narrative, critics took issue with the idea that a writer or poet, for instance, would be revealed directly through their work. Accordingly, with the work of

Umberto Eco (1981), Wolfgang Iser (1974) and H.R. Jauss (1982) among others, the consensus emerged that the act of communication involves a complex series of apparatuses, wherein meaning is encoded, using different processes, and decoded by a range of readers with varying results. In his encoding/decoding model, Hall developed these theories by examining the other end of the meaning-making process through the introduction of the subaltern, from cultural studies and postcolonial theory, in order to address the imbalances of power implicit in the idea of meaning making.

The implications for the accuracy debate now become apparent. Accuracy, as we have seen, is about the extent to which a given historical fact aligns with its representation in a given narrative. Narrative, however, is not extrinsic to the viewer or consumer. It is, instead, the result of a collaborative effort between the viewer and the text, and which is often focused on and is produced by the centre rather than the margin, the dominant rather than the subaltern. Thus, historical narratives often come to be imposed by an elite whose privilege portrays any alternative interpretation as ‘inaccurate’. The facts remain true, but the role of narrative as a carrier of dominant meaning has a strong ideological dimension (White 1990; Cannadine et al. 2011).

Further, the understanding of a given narrative is filtered through at least one process of encoding and decoding, and is contingent on a whole set of competences on the part of the viewer and the filmmaker. Such a position is perhaps most obvious in the case of interactive historical media such as video games. The *Assassin's Creed* series, for example, is set in a variety of periods and places in the past, and the experience differs for each player as they combine and interact with the various historical elements of the game. When asked about their responsibility to the historical record, the creators (Ubisoft) and their historical advisers replied that “history is our playground” (see Batchelor 2018). That response does not imply that Ubisoft neglects the historical evidence—on the contrary, they often do a great deal of research—but rather that accuracy is not always their primary concern when gameplay comes into consideration.

By way of conclusion, I tie together these threads and propose a new way of thinking about historical media and their relationship to accuracy. First, in the absence of any definitive evidence about what, precisely, audiences are doing or how they are consuming historical media, current debates rely on a theoretical construct of audiences. Bringing in Hall's encoding/decoding model and the broader

implications of reception theory means that many assumptions, for example that audiences will directly absorb content, are no longer tenable. Another casualty is the argument that accuracy is elemental, because it is rooted in the suggestion that these media must take responsibility for public depictions of history as though they were historians. In reality, it is impossible to make such assumptions when there is no consensus on how, or whether, those messages are received. If this is accepted to be the case, then the above interdisciplinary methodological modes of enquiry demand that the debate shifts from matters of accuracy to audience. In doing so, I am not suggesting that accuracy does not matter, but merely observing that we have not yet established what role it plays in historical media.

My suggestions are that in asking these questions we need to focus on the unique media diet of each audience member and how that diet influences the ways in which subsequent representations are consumed. Thus Jauss' (1982) writings about the horizons of expectations come into play. If each viewer's individual media diet influences how any given historical media text is understood, and if the question of accuracy depends on what that viewer is prepared to accept as credible, then the horizon of expectations leads to a different set of limitations, which I propose to call the 'boundary of the credible'.

Logically, to follow the central tenets of reception theory, those boundaries, or horizons, are unique to each viewer. Accuracy means something different if each audience member is an individual, active agent coming to historical media with a unique set of tastes, competences and ideas about what is or is not credible. What sounds like an anything-goes relativism is, from the audience perspective, a simple statement of fact. The concept of accuracy therefore becomes an interdisciplinary problem that requires a suitably interdisciplinary mode of response. The meaning of historical media can only be assessed in the context of the unique circumstances of each audience member's reading or viewing. A new understanding of accuracy must also be capable of understanding the complex ways in which those individuals then share those ideas and form patterns of collective understanding. Not recognising the role of the audience member in the consumption of historical media would mean that history becomes everyone's playground.

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A black and white photograph of a gravestone for James Deetz. The stone is dark with light-colored text and carvings. The top features a semi-circular arch containing a carving of a skull with wings and crossed bones. The text is inscribed in a simple, slightly irregular font. The sides of the stone are decorated with vertical scrollwork.

Here lyes Buried
James Deetz
born to this world Feb 8th 1930
departed for another NOV 25 2000
remember me AS YOU PASS BY
AS YOU ARE SO ONCE WAS I
AS I AM SOON YOU shall be
prepare for death and follow ME

I told YOU I WAS SICK



CROWNE PLAZA THEATRE



Ladies Are Requested To Kindly Remove Their Hats.

ARCHAEOLOGISTS AS STORYTELLERS II: THE SEQUEL

BROUGHT TO THE STAGE BY MRS. MARY PRAETZELLIS

Thursday Jan 8, 1998

1:20 *Slaves, Rings, and Rubbish* (Mr. M. Hall)

1:40 *A Lost Memoir of a Lowell Boardinghouse Keeper*
(Ms. M. Beaudry)

2:00 *Fort Frederica's Hidden Past or
Tales a Pot might Tell* (Ms. A. Yentsch)

2:20 *"I Never Expect to Preach There Again."* ... (Ms. R. Ryder)

INTERMISSION (2:40-3:00)

3:00 *Red Light Voices* (Ms. J. Costello and Ms. J. Tordoff)

3:20 *Plantation Dialogs: A Conversation in One Act and
Two Centuries* (Mr. D. Mouer and Ms. Y. Edwards-Ingram)

3:40 *The Tale of Fermín Valenzuela...* (Mr. A. and Ms. M. Praetzelis)

4:00 *Thomas Jefferson Describes his "Novel Techniques"*
for Unearthing the Mysteries of the Past

(Ms. M-C. Garden and Mr. B. Barker)

15 Archaeological narrative and humour in a post-truth world

The obligatory sum-up article

Adrian Praetzelis

Got menshen gemakht makhmes meyses lib.

(God made humanity because He loves stories.)

Yiddish proverb

In 1924, archaeologist Mark Raymond Harrington chalked up two publications: *American Anthropologist* carried his article 'The Ozark

Bluffdwellers’, while ‘Teoquitla the Golden’ was published in the fantasy pulp magazine *Weird Tales* (Harrington 1924a, 1924b). In a sly nod to his work at the Archaic-period rock shelters described in the Ozark Bluff-Dwellers piece, Harrington chose as his literary pseudonym Ramon de las Cuevas—Raymond of the Caves. This was a man with a sense of humour.

Archaeologists may have been writing fiction and reflecting on it for almost as long as the profession has existed (Nelson 2003). Yet it was the opening to James Deetz’s *In Small Things Forgotten* (1977) that made me think, “Can he do that?” The book opens with six short fictional narratives, each of which illustrates the interaction of people with their material culture:

Salem, Massachusetts, 1795. Mary Andrews looked sadly at the pieces of the fine queens-ware coffee pot which had been broken the day before and now lay with clamshells and trimmings from carrots and parsnips in a bucket just inside the hall of the house. She took the bucket outside and walking to the rear of the yard, dumped its contents into the deep square pit that had been dug the week before.

(Deetz 1977: 3)

It was classic Deetz (Figure 15.1). He wanted to illustrate how mundane acts create the archaeological record, but chose to describe the process in human terms rather than use Michael Schiffer’s (1976) c- and n-transform terminology that had recently burst upon the scene.

Figure 15.1 James Deetz’s tombstone was carved by Dave Wheelock with Jim’s favourite seventeenth-century epitaph (image by Adrian Praetzelis)

Kent Flannery’s (1982) brilliant and irreverent address ‘The Golden Marshalltown’ was even more startling. One can imagine the scene: it was the 1981 American Anthropological Association conference, that most populous and prestigious of anthropological gatherings. Flannery mounts the stage to present the Distinguished Lecture (what a puffed-up name!). Knowing the speaker’s reputation, the audience is anticipating something both erudite and entertaining. Then Flannery proceeds to give them a parable of archaeological practice using the characters he had introduced in *The Early Mesoamerican Village* (Flannery 1976)—the Real Mesoamerican Archaeologist and the rest. It was hilarious, full of pathos, and, like the classical allegories that

have come down from the past, it was the lie that told the truth.

Presenting fictional characters to the gaze of professional scholars is a courageous act. The technical report or journal article lives or dies by its substantive content. But fiction exposes one's self. Before committing to paper, it is easy to think, "Oh, I could do *that*". But having done it, you can no longer hide from the truth, for a piece of fiction must work for the *reader*. It is said that first novels tend to be autobiographical. This is decidedly true of archaeological fiction penned by dabblers like me. We recognise that the writing process is self-revelatory and, consequently, a step into a perilous realm. Anxious to sort through our thoughts on the matter, especially the relationship between writer and subject, we feel compelled to be reflexive. Inevitably, this sets up a tension between the writer as a creative individual and as an archaeologist whose thinking reflects the data-driven methods of the social sciences rather than the interpretative approach more characteristic of the humanities. In one of many emails to the contributors to this volume, the editors wrote that "inevitably a lot of us have adopted an autobiographical style to articulate our personal experiences. We're keen to preserve this, but we would also like to ensure that general (and generalisable) themes emerge from the diversity of voices" (van Helden & Witcher 2017, elec. comm.). As the obligatory summing-up article, this chapter will offer both an analysis (such a scientific-sounding word) of some common themes in this collection as well as reflections on the transformational potential of fiction writing for the archaeologist.

It was not hard to find common threads running through these chapters. I write that with some surprise as edited volumes sometimes hang together by a rather flimsy strand. In this case, the commonalities emerge as an eclectic group of inventive people push the boundaries of creativity in a discipline that often sits uncomfortably between the sciences and the humanities. From their common cultural background as scholars and artists emerge some common interests that I express below, as an homage to Henry Glassie (1975: 170), in tripartite form: narrative as archaeological method, for developing empathy and for artistic expression.

Narrative as method

By narrative as method I mean using the archaeological imagination to turn the stuff of archaeology into both innovative products and new ideas for research. This theme, which may be the authors' strongest

link, has two threads: a general dissatisfaction with the customary modes by which we present our work and the potential to expand our view of the past for both scientific and humanistic understanding by unleashing archaeologists' creative capacity.

What modes of 'translation' (Patton, [Chapter 4](#)) of our insights from professional idiom to non-archaeologists are available and should we bother? Since the professionalisation of archaeology, the audience for archaeological products is primarily us. It is a running joke on campus that the prestige of a scholarly journal increases in inverse relation to its readership. *Current Anthropology*, for example, is at the same time often unreadably dense and very impressive on one's résumé. The traditional museum offers some outlet to the non-archaeological world, but it arrives with its own baggage. As Theodor Adorno (1981: 175) points out, for some people the words 'museum' and 'mausoleum' have more than just an alliterative connection. The 2017 opening of a civil rights museum in Mississippi, for example, made some locals reflect that the very act of placing objects and themes in a museum puts them safely in the past where old conflicts are settled (Fisher 2017). This characterisation may be unfair in an era when progressive museums are not so much monuments to ordering, control and historical intelligibility—Foucault's (2002: 7) "total history"—than places whose purpose is cultural critique. It is nevertheless a reality. Alternative modes include poetry (Kavanagh, [Chapter 10](#)), docudrama (Ripanti & Osti, [Chapter 7](#)), multimedia (Savani & Thompson, [Chapter 11](#)) and novelisation (Wickham-Jones, [Chapter 2](#), Elphinstone, [Chapter 3](#), and Patton, [Chapter 4](#)).

Several authors mention how important it is to create rounded, interesting characters and scenarios for their work to capture and maintain the reader's interest. Margaret Elphinstone ([Chapter 3](#)) gets to the heart of the matter, writing that the audience must "care enough to suspend all disbelief and accept it, at least while they read it, and perhaps for longer, as truth. And rightly so because as long as the narrative is working properly, within its own terms, it is". At the same time, to be effective the writer cannot be heavy-handed and must leave the impression that the facts are speaking for themselves. This is not a simple equation for, as Andrew B.R. Elliott ([Chapter 14](#)) puts it, the "boundary of the credible" has more to do with what the audience is willing to accept as authentic than the actual evidence. This is particularly crucial in docudrama and other material whose purpose is explicitly educational (see Ripanti & Osti, [Chapter 7](#)). For when the novelist fails, they merely sell fewer books, but the very

survival (i.e. funding) of future archaeological research will depend on successful public outreach. The field of Classical Reception Studies is directly relevant to this discussion of authenticity and, indeed, to the general theme of this volume. As explained by Joanna Paul ([Chapter 13](#)), its goal is to re-examine how Greek and Roman texts and material culture are used in “everything from Renaissance drama to Hollywood film and from political discourse to catwalk fashion” as well as historical fiction. Fiona Hobden’s ([Chapter 12](#)) discussion of a television production of the story of Spartacus exemplifies this academic field. Her contribution makes the point that most people are not academicians and encounter the past through fiction, not scholarship.

These reflections on the fiction writer’s craft put me in mind of Vincent Crapanzano’s (1986) essay ‘Hermes’s Dilemma’ in which he shows how ethnographers use literary devices (hypotyposis, external theatrical narrativity, interpretative virtuosity) to make their storyline appear more plausible to the reader. “Fact is a poor storyteller”, wrote Somerset Maugham (1928: 2) in the introduction to his spy novel *Ashenden*, “it has no sense of climax and whittles away its dramatic effects in irrelevance” (see also the ‘archaeological virus’, Savani & Thompson, [Chapter 11](#)). The boundary between ethnography and historical narrative turns out to be more of a gradation than a bright line.

The writers of narrative are subject to the same critique as ethnographers for their representation of people who cannot talk back. “By whose authority do I speak [...] or not speak [...] for them?” asks Jim Gibb ([Chapter 8](#)). Anthropologists have beat up themselves and each other over this issue since the 1970s. But instead of getting knotted up in self-recrimination over the sins of our forebears, it is worth remembering that although anthropological writing gave credibility to imperialism, it can just as easily be “counter-hegemonic” (Clifford 1986: 9–10). The postcolonial critique of anthropology notwithstanding, it is inevitable that if anthropologically informed writers shy away from the work of interpretation, the void will be filled by others who are more or less indifferent to the pitfalls of a dubious epistemology. Narrative as method begins reflexively “at the trowel’s edge” by contemplating archaeological fieldwork itself and “documenting the documentation”, including the excavators’ reflections on the process (Hodder 1999: 92, 2003: 61). Michael Given ([Chapter 9](#)) describes his sudden loss of confidence in the conventional methods of data collection. Like

Donald Henson ([Chapter 5](#)), he seems to ask, *Is this all there is?*

At the core of much archaeological narrative is the desire to see the operation of our pet social theories in the lives of characters we can care about, to speculate how these abstract ideas might play out in day-to-day existence. We do this by imagining convincingly authentic incidents of social life carried out on the small scale and “in greater detail than archaeological inference, in its strict sense, permits” (Patton, [Chapter 4](#)). Of course, the extent to which we allow our imaginations to lead us varies. For Caroline Wickham-Jones ([Chapter 2](#)), “archaeological fact [...] is just the springboard for what must follow”—interpretation. Fiona Hobden ([Chapter 12](#)) goes even further by suggesting an “equivalence to any and all representations of the past [...] [that] places professional historians and makers of historical fiction on a level playing field”. The usefulness of fiction as a way of reinvigorating one’s research is cited by Victoria Thompson ([Chapter 11](#), co-authored with Giacomo Savani), who reports that she began writing explicitly for the purpose of reviving a project that “had run into the sand for lack of evidence”. Jim Gibb ([Chapter 8](#)) also begins with the imaginative process. This he mines for its archaeological implications, using imagined dialogue to suggest archaeologically “testable implications” and other “measureable phenomena” in relation to specific research issues. It is important to note that the pragmatic Gibb has spent most of his career not in academe but in commercial archaeology. He has not weathered that environment through the up-to-the-minuteness of his citations. Instead, his job is to develop practical, scientific research designs that survive the sceptical review of agency functionaries for whom archaeology is just another environmental obstruction along with contaminated soil and endangered rats.

Developing empathy while preserving science

By developing empathy while preserving science, I mean how temporarily stepping back from scientific detachment helps us recognise the humanity of the people of the past. According to Erin Kavanagh ([Chapter 10](#)), various forms of narrative are alternatives (although not replacements) for the solemn technical reports that our colleagues, and our funders, require of us. Her own chapter in this volume is interlaced with cartoons, a poem abstracted from a technical article and other oddities. Here, the medium is also the message: it is not just what you say but also how you express it.

Several authors recognise that fundable research designs tend to emphasise the historical, ecological and cultural characteristics of groups, while the people who constituted these populations get lost in the fog of historical generalisations. Even in fictionalised accounts, people tend to be characterised by what they do, such as obtaining food, rather than who they might have been, writes Donald Henson (Chapter 5). We concentrate on what is archaeologically demonstrable, and yet “there is much more to the study and understanding of the Mesolithic than wondering how often these prehistoric people moved settlements, whether they actually ate limpets or whether they made their microliths with leading-edge retouch”.

Empathy can be a perilous tool, observe Daniël van Helden and Robert Witcher (Chapter 6). For overidentification with the people of the past may lead us apparently to condone cultural practices we find abhorrent. In this way, empathy is rather like cultural relativism. Used without restraint it may lead to moral paralysis—the unwillingness to discriminate. But empathy in the sense of recognising the humanity of the people of the past is a different matter. Applied with this particular end in mind, it can help us appreciate lost ways of life and those who lived them. The “faceless blobs” (Tringham 1991: 94) who inhabit the past are revived, and we learn to identify with the slaves rather than their Roman masters (Hobden, Chapter 12). “Empathy abandoned by reason produces impossible monsters”, write van Helden and Witcher; “United with her, she is the mother of great understanding” (Figure 15.2).

Figure 15.2 Adrian Praetzelis [right] becoming empathetic or something like while portraying 1850s lawyer Josiah Gallup [left] (image by Adrian Praetzelis)

To allow some empathy for the people whose material remains we dig up does not mean abandoning the scientific method any more than temporarily assuming a posture of cultural relativity. They are all tools in Ludwig Wittgenstein’s (1958: 6) “toolbox”. Gibb (Chapter 8), for example, takes an explicitly scientific approach to research design but uses imagined conversations to generate action possibilities. Allowing empathy also does not mean giving way to the delusion that our feelings about the past are the same as those of its actors. The “irrecoverability” of the author’s intention and the “inaccessibility of ancient psychologies” are axiomatic in Classical Reception Studies, according to Joanna Paul (Chapter 13). In spite of every effort at

authenticity, the historical ethnographer creates allegories (*sensu* Clifford 1986). Novelist Margaret Elphinstone ([Chapter 3](#)) seems to recognise that point and, to her comment that “all reconstructions belong primarily to their own time”, one might add “and to their own author”.

Social scientists know that their work is affected by personal baggage and have questioned whether any qualitative research can be entirely free of experimenter influence. In what used to be known as the Hawthorne effect, for example, research subjects will change their behaviour as soon as they realise they are being observed (Orne 1969). But instead of trying to eliminate experimental bias as quantitative researchers do with tools such as statistical sampling, qualitative workers recognise its inevitability and try to manage its effects. A just-the-facts-ma’am approach to reporting and analysis is the bedrock on which prehistory has been constructed. This is the venue in which the basic issues of who, what, where and when must be settled before we can approach the why and how questions (Taylor 1948).

Science is a good thing, but, as several contributors to this volume have mentioned, its conventions may stifle the imagination. The disappearance of the formerly ubiquitous personal pronoun from scientific writing was significant in the slow retreat from all works of scholarship of what Atkinson (1998: 76) calls the authorial persona, and emblematic of the change to object-centred scholarly discourse in writing and academic presentation. The IMRAD (Introduction, Methods, Results, Discussion) structure of the scholarly article and the conference paper have been de rigueur for decades (Sollaci & Pereira 2004) and, consequently, have a feeling of inevitability about them. And yet as the poster on my dentist’s wall says, “You can cut all the flowers but you cannot keep spring from coming” (attributed to Pablo Neruda).

Artistic expression

Archaeologists are imaginative individuals whose creativity is stimulated by exposure to other times, other ways of living and thinking. James Deetz used to say that John Barth’s (1960) novel *The Sot-Weed Factor* brought colonial America closer than most archaeology. One thing the contributors to this book seem to agree on is that in writing what purport to be factual accounts of historical ethnography, we are in fact “writing culture” (Clifford & Marcus

1986).

Inevitably, some will question whether artistic practice in archaeology is a self-indulgent waste of money. It is an issue that has been argued in one form or another since Plato's *Republic*, where he argues that since a mirror can imitate life better than any artist, who needs 'em? Plato's assumption that all art is representational and can be judged by the faithfulness of its depictions is, of course, wrong. The analogy to our profession is clear: for although the archaeologist's initial role may be a draughtsman, she or he may aspire to be a painter! Kristian Kristiansen (2011) expresses what I suspect to be a widely felt belief along similar lines: that the popularity of non-scientific approaches in archaeology is causing it to lose credibility and to squander its social capital as, according to some of our colleagues, these research styles "taint" archaeology with an undesirable "softness" (see overview by Sabloff 1998: 871). And then there's the money. If archaeological funding is a zero-sum game, it is not surprising that Kristiansen and his ilk are not keen on postmodernism. The more resources that are sucked up by your work, the less are available to me. But perhaps, asks the outsider, creativity is more esteemed in the commercial archaeology sector? Hardly. Consulting archaeologists will tell you that almost every product that is not legally mandated is eventually value-engineered off the table.

In archaeology, as in every other profession of discovery, our self-imposed banality often frustrates attempts at creative work. "If we are to write about these wonders, let us at least try to do so, wonderfully", urges Erin Kavanagh ([Chapter 10](#)). But she knows the pressures to be conventional, even if a poet must ask the question all the same. Where our science is predictable and contingent, our artistic products may be spontaneous and evocative. John Updike (1984) could just have easily been talking about prose instead of art when he described predictability as the "anti-virtue in a field where we hope to be astonished and startled and at some deep level refreshed". There is much to be said in favour of the shock of the unexpected in creating wonderment and stirring the spirit—even at an academic conference! Donald Henson ([Chapter 5](#)) is understated when he writes that fictional narratives are counterpoint to academic presentations; they are the antithesis. The creative collaboration of Giacomo Savani and Victoria Thompson ([Chapter 11](#)) is a good example. They work in different media: Savani is a visual artist, Thompson a writer. In their partnership, the artist works to bring out atmosphere and small-scale meanings hinted at in the written text. Light draws the eye to the

spaces in between. Landscape has agency. Their presentation at the 2015 Theoretical Archaeology Group meeting in Bradford (from which their chapter derives) was packed. Why? Because archaeologists are yearning for something more, something different. Like Erin Kavanagh, they are looking for ways to express their wonder at the wonders we find.

Risks and advantages

And always keep a-hold of Nurse
For fear of finding something worse.

(*Jim* by Hilaire Belloc 1907)

More than ever in these days of so-called post-truth, archaeologists fear their work may contribute to the already plentiful ‘alternative facts’ about the past. Although the concept of The Truth has been thoroughly deconstructed, and Alan Sokal’s (1996) satire notwithstanding, several of the authors in this volume insist that archaeological facts do actually exist—although not in the way we conceived of them before archaeology’s “loss of innocence” (Clarke 1968, 1973). In Hilaire Belloc’s poem *Jim*, the disobedient boy ran away from his nurse and was eaten by a lion. By leaving the well-trodden path of traditional scholarly reporting, archaeological narrative may also have unfortunate outcomes. Fiona Hobden cites television reviewer Phelim O’Neill’s (2010) comment that “no one is going to mistake this [the drama *Spartacus*] for a documentary”. True enough, but the credibility of a scholarly field like archaeology may lend the ring of truth to fictional narratives by archaeologists, leading the unsuspecting to believe that these are actual historical accounts (Lewis 2000: 7–8). Belloc’s “something worse” is a potential free-for-all in which relaxed scientific rigour leads to a circumstance when “everybody’s ideas are [judged] equally good, no matter how stupid they are” (Binford, cited in Thurman & Binford 1998: 52). These concerns are real and cannot be rationalised away into a footnote as settled issues that a maturing discipline has now moved beyond. Others better trained in philosophy, however, will have to hash out these complications. I merely kibitz on the topic and leave it unresolved.

THE SCENE: An academic conference (never mind which one).

THE TIME: 1979. Adrian is giving his first-ever conference presentation.

It goes well and after 20 minutes he steps down fairly pleased with himself. Two days later he has sat in on dozens of other papers and is intellectually punch-drunk. Pictures of the ensuing 40 years of conferences dash across the screen intercut with iconic images showing the passage of time: Ronald Reagan is shot, Rodney King beaten, 9–11, Trump. On the stage, slide projectors give way to PowerPoint, paper notes to laptop computers. More women. Fewer neckties. The same unreadable name tags. Now the camera pans and we see that despite the passing decades, the audiences seem similarly jaded. They had come hundreds, thousands of miles for this. And yet...

It was in the early 1980s that Mary Praetzellis and I realised that academic conferences are boring. Not all of them and not all of the time, of course, but enough to make one think that something was wrong. Was it just me? Nope. It was obvious even to this newish university lecturer that the bog-standard conference format strong-arms presenters into using outdated teaching techniques: the *empty vessel* refers to the content of the audience's head prior to being filled with wisdom by the *sage-on-the-stage*. These are dreary and ineffective ways to convey ideas. We all know it, and yet we go along with the programme. Pierre Bourdieu (1986) might have interpreted the survival of this arcane structure as a technique academicians use to maintain their cultural capital. I think it is simple inertia. Either way, conforming to the structure is one way we demonstrate to each other that we are legitimate, that we belong, and that we know the rules.

The 'Archaeologists as Storytellers' symposia emerged from this context. Organised by Mary Praetzellis and performed at several national conferences starting in 1997 (Praetzellis 1998), 'Storytellers' encouraged archaeologists to break the rules by saying more than the evidence supported (Figure 15.3). The goal was to enliven earnest conference proceedings by unleashing archaeologists' creativity and sense of fun. There were one-act plays, imagined conversations and invented diaries. "Speakers will tell stories based upon information from a multitude of sources", wrote Mary in the session abstract. "These sources and their data will be referred to only parenthetically in slides and/or handouts. The stories may be about a person, place, or event, and will be readily understandable" (Praetzellis 2004). By disturbing ideas of what 'should' go on at a conference, the effect on the audience is one of *jouissance*—the unsettling feeling of pleasure that emerges when conventional expectations are interrupted by the unanticipated and inappropriate (Barthes 1975: 14).

Figure 15.3 Playbill handed out to the audience at ‘Storytellers II: The Sequel’, performed at the 1998 Society for Historical Archaeology conference (image by Adrian Praetzellis)

‘Storytellers’ was by no means the only effort to open up scholarly conferences to various flavours of high weirdness. In ‘Other ways and other’s ways...’, a session organised by Meredith Chesson at the American Anthropological Association’s annual meeting in 2000, participants were encouraged to make intellectual and emotional connections between themselves and the audience. The format was of a series of short presentations that put the archaeologist or ethnographer at the centre as a performer. There was 3D-computer animation, poetry, dance (“ethno-[choreo]-graphy”), a multimedia opera and an archaeology-based, first-person narrative, all with the goal of pushing “the boundaries of canonical formulas for presenting their research” and making “archaeology come alive” (AAA 2000: 34).

Co-conspirators found these performances at least as intellectually stimulating as a standard symposium, but they were not for the ambitious. Explicitly theatrical, cheeky and unintellectual-sounding on a résumé, participation in *Storytellers* could not possibly enhance your career. At least one untenured professor was advised by the then-president of a national archaeological society to steer clear of the *Storytellers* genre or be branded an intellectual lightweight (Anonymous 1998, pers. comm.). Also, there is the issue that conference sessions that emphasise performance and participation do not translate well into flat, citable, book-like publications (see Van Dyke & Bernbeck 2015 for an exception). And like public outreach, university tenure committees do not take them seriously (Watermeyer & Lewis 2018), labelling these efforts mere snackable content that pander to the ever-shortening attention span of the modern student. One outcome is that we lard our imaginative work with dense theoretical rationalisations to assure the reader that we are, in fact, serious scholars.

The language and structure of many of the chapters in this volume reflect the fusion of art and science they are promoting. They are fun to read, but some humour would be welcome. Scholars hesitate to impose themselves onto the men and women of the past. Humour seems disrespectful, whereas earnestness and intellectual acuity seem to dignify the people to whom we are trying to give voice. Intended as a sign of respect, this solemnity encourages us to take ourselves too seriously—and this is not a quality that needs nurturing among academicians!

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